

The First Baptist Church, Midland  
May 16, 2010  
Luke 19:1-10

***The Power of Kindness***  
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick  
Theme: Kindness

Many years ago I shared with you a Christmas shopping experience dating back to the 80's. Do you remember? (How's that for positive thinking?) Anyway, I want to reference that experience once again because it embraces so beautifully the theme of our gathering today.

It occurred in McAlpin's which was a department stores in the Middletown Mall. The shopping season was drawing toward its culmination and shoppers were everywhere. So as you might imagine, the gift wrapping department in this particular store was overwhelmed.

Everyone waiting had drawn a number and I don't remember what mine happened to be. But I do recall that there were about 25 people in front of me. And after I had been there awhile patiently waiting my turn, a frenzied young lady ran up to the counter laden with gifts. She took her number off the number stand and then looked at the number being served. You could see the panic in her face. Moving to the side of the counter, she politely addressed the lady working to see if she could leave her purchases to be wrapped at the wrapper's convenience and then return later in the day when she finished work to pick them up. She was obviously a mall store employee and was rushed to get back to work.

The harried wrapper very curtly looked at the young lady and responded with an attitude: *No, you can't leave your gifts. It's against company policy.*

*But I've got to get back to work, she pleaded. This is my only chance to do my shopping and my family is leaving as soon as I'm finished to go to my grandmother's for Christmas. Please, can't you make an exception and help me?*

With a somewhat agitated voice, the wrapper responded: *Young lady... perhaps you should have planned a little further ahead. Your problem is not my problem. No! I can't help you.*

A kind of hush fell over the crowd. It felt like we were all being reprimanded. This poor young girl was crestfallen and her eyes began to fill with tears. She didn't know what to do and you could tell she was stressed to the limit. This not so courteous woman behind the counter had broken her spirit. The crowd of shoppers waiting for service themselves stood there just watching this interaction feeling sorry but only one in that crowd did anything about it.

That lot fell to an older, more mature woman. I'd guess she was probably close to 80 years old and she was the next person in line waiting to be served. I don't know how long she had been patiently standing there. She laid her packages on the counter and walked over to this young girl who was so obviously flustered. She then proceeded to put her arm around this

stranger and very gently said, *Now sweetheart, it will be okay. Here, you take my number.* And before this young lady could do anything or say another word, this kind old woman took the number from her new friend's hand and replaced it with her own. And turning to the gift wrapper she said, *I believe this young lady is next in line.* Then she feebly made her way back to her packages, picked them up and started to move to the back of the line.

Now as this occurred, I happened to be sitting next to an older gentleman watching this most unlikely encounter unfold. He poked me with his skinny arm, smiled and said, *Ain't she something!* I could tell his words spoke for the sentiment of the crowd. Of course by now, that dear older saint had inspired everyone and the crowd insisted that this dear elder stay at the front of the line. And there they were side by side... the older angel and the young girl. We all watched as they stood talking to each other while the wrapping ladies tended to their packages.

Finally, when they were finished the dear one made her way through the crowd. It parted much as I imagine the Red Sea separated under the mighty hand of Moses. And again to my surprise, she set her sight in my direction stopping by the older gent next to me. *Are you ready, Dad,* she said in her delightful way. He struggled to get up so I stood and helped him to his feet. He looked at me with the biggest smile you've ever seen and said, *Aren't I a lucky devil...*

I want to tell you, there wasn't a person who experienced this moment who wasn't touched by that exchange. The kindness shown changed the mood of that collection of tired shoppers. Suddenly, everyone was a friend and no one was a stranger. Conversations ensued. Laughter erupted. And spirits were lifted!

The power of kindness... it can modify your day, alter your mood. And who knows... it could even change your life. Let me prove that to you as we visit this 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel.

This is a wonderful story of an intriguing encounter between Jesus and little man named Zacchaeus. This is a familiar story to many but new to some, I'm sure. And it centers upon a guy named Zacchaeus.

It's always struck me as odd that we are quick to call him little because of his stature. According to tradition and according to the story itself, he really was a short man. In fact, that's why he was in the tree by the side of the road. He wanted to see Jesus and with the crowds surrounding him, that was impossible. Hence he found the sycamore tree, climbed up on one of its limbs and waited for the parade to pass by.

But the truth is, Zacchaeus was little in other ways and frankly, I believe they were much more damaging. For example, he had very little integrity. In his latest book, *If the Church Were Christian*, Philip Gulley describes Zacchaeus as "a strong-arm tax collector whose traitorous alliance with the occupying powers caused his fellow Jews to brand him as a despicable sellout." (HarperOne, New York, New York: 2010, pg. 46) Put another way, this tax collector had turned upon his own people in an effort to serve the Roman occupation. He saw it as a way to grow very wealthy and wasn't concerned about who he would be hurting along the way. Never mind that he was a Jew himself. If stepping upon his brothers and sisters was what he needed to do in

an effort to get ahead, so be it. And it worked. This little man with little integrity grew very wealthy.

Then it's also safe to say Zacchaeus had very little faith. He was a lapsed Jew. He had grown up in the tradition but had cast it off when throwing his lot to the Romans. Security in this life afforded by things became much more important to him than inner spiritual serenity. So I'll say it again... Zacchaeus was a little guy who was short on integrity and faith. He was easy to dislike and disparage... not the kind of person you would readily embrace.

Yet along comes Jesus and suddenly through a simple act of kindness, Zacchaeus' life was turned upside down. With a smile and warm invitation, this Messiah embraced one who was untouchable. Looking into the tree with a gaze that penetrated the eyes and warmed the heart of this little guy, Jesus invited himself into his life. By reaching out Jesus was able to reach within the weary tax collector and his spirit was suddenly strangely warmed. When everybody gave Zacchaeus the cold shoulder, Jesus offered a warm embrace. He extended kindness in a graceful way and this little man suddenly stood tall, regained his integrity and rediscovered his faith. It's amazing what feeling valued can do to a person, isn't it? And there is no one who has ever lived who has added value to another human being the way our Savior did. He didn't care how different they were... how corrupt they might have been... or how antagonistic they seemed to be. He simply respected everyone and treated every person with dignity going out of his way to be benevolent, considerate and above all, kind. And when all was said and done, this is the mantle of responsibility he placed upon our shoulders by inviting and encouraging us to do the same.

But I have to confess that I fear our culture is losing its desire to be kind. Somehow the spirit of antagonism has replaced the character of kindness. Oh, it's easy to be kind to people we know and love.... to those in our own circle of influence. Even in his day, Jesus defined that as the reality. But what about the people who are outside that circle? What about people we disagree with? I fear we are losing the ability to trust and engage our adversaries with respect.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the very halls of Congress. The people whom we elect to represent us have lost the art of civility. We have witnessed in recent years the demise of respect as public discourse in our country has deteriorated. We have become an angry and polarized society. Sad to say this is the one place where we are non-partisan. By that I mean, both sides of the political spectrum share accountability in this rush to destroy anyone who disagrees with their particular point of view. The ability to work together toward the common good has gone AWOL and this has had a tremendous impact upon our culture. A recent poll showed that more than 80% of the people in this country have lost respect for and do not trust their elected representatives. When will our elected officials learn they are losing control?

Perhaps it is time for each of us to step forward to say "enough". I would hope that the church can become what Roy Medley, the General Secretary of the American Baptist Churches, has called "a guiding force in modeling public civility". You know, Paul said it very well when writing to the church in Ephesus a long time ago (4:1-2). In his words, **"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love."** If

we are truly a nation founded upon spiritual principles, we better listen to Paul before it is too late.

Toward this end, I recently signed a “Covenant for Civility”. This is a document created to help us reason together as the Bible says. It was created by an organization called *Sojourners* and its purpose is to enable us to better put our faith in action. The fascinating thing about this covenant is that it has been signed by people of all religious persuasions. This isn’t a liberal or a conservative document. It is a reasoned expression calling upon those in the halls of Congress to put aside their division and re-learn the art of reconciliation. Let me read to you the first paragraph...

*As Christian pastors and leaders with diverse theological and political beliefs, we have come together to make this covenant with each other, and to commend it to the church, faith-based organizations, and individuals, so that together we can contribute to a more civil national discourse. The church in the United States can offer a message of hope and reconciliation to a nation that is deeply divided by political and cultural differences. Too often, however, we have reflected the political divisions of our culture rather than the unity we have in the body of Christ. We come together to urge those who claim the name of Christ to “put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:31-32).*

I believe kindness can win the day. I believe it can be contagious. When we are kind to one another it spreads. I believe it can be spontaneous. We never know when the opportunity to be kind will present itself. And I believe it can be life changing. It gives us a new way to view the world and relate to all people. The more we care for the happiness of others and the more we create possibilities for that happiness by extending kindness, the greater is our own sense of well-being. And even more to the point, the greater will be the stability of our culture and our hope for the future.

Martin E. Marty, one of the great Christian apologists of our time, has hanging on his study wall a motto given to him by a mentor and former bishop. He ponders it daily. Quite simply it says, "Life is short and we have not much time for gladdening the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Oh, be swift to love; make haste to be kind."

Amen and AMEN!