

A King's Kindness

The Old Testament Lesson

In our series of sermons on the fruits of the Spirit, we have focused on Love, Joy, Peace and Patience. Today we look at the fruit of Kindness. Our Old Testament Lesson provides us an example. Most kings in David's day tried to wipe out the families of their rivals in order to prevent any descendants from seeking the throne. But David showed kindness to Mephibosheth, whose father was Jonathan and whose grandfather was King Saul. David was kind, partly because of his loyalty to God's previously anointed king, partly for political reasons (to unite Judah and Israel), and partly because of his vow to show kindness to all of Jonathan's descendants. Listen to these words from 2 Samuel 9...

The Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson we have an example of the kindness of Jesus, in this case to little children. Listen to these words from Matthew 19:13-14...

Sermon

It has been said that the greatest legacy of President George H. Bush is the kindness and compassion he showed throughout his life. You may have heard of the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, the small nonprofit that promotes kindness in schools, the workplace, and at home. The great German writer Johann Goethe (gera) said, "Kindness is the golden chain by which society is bound together. And Robert Burns, the Scottish poet of the 18th century wrote:

The heart benevolent and kind
the most resembles God.
("A Winter Night")

The Bible tells us that kindness is not an option for God's people. Listen to Micah 6:8:

...and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Furthermore, scripture provides us with many acts of kindness, like the kindness of the Good Samaritan toward a beaten and robbed Jew, found in a parable of Jesus in Luke 10 (vv. 25-37). In 2 Samuel 9 we find an example from the Old Testament.

In First Samuel we learn of the deep and abiding friendship between David and King Saul's son, Jonathan. King Saul becomes jealous of David's military prowess and threatens to have David executed. Then Jonathan intervenes and warns David by a prearranged plan involving where Jonathan would shoot his arrows, making it possible for David to escape. But before he flees, David and Jonathan make a covenant with each other, promising that they will care for the descendants of the other, should one of them be killed.

Mephibosheth is first mentioned in a little footnote in 2 Samuel 4. He was Jonathan's son and therefore a grandson and heir of King Saul. If all had gone well with Saul, Mephibosheth eventually would have inherited the kingdom. But Saul and Jonathan were killed in the battle on Mount Gilboa, and David became king. It was when news of the battle came to the family of Jonathan that we first hear of little Mephibosheth.

The story appears in Chapter 4, verse 4 of 2 Samuel:

Jonathan, the son of Saul, had a son who was crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel; and his nurse took him up, and fled; and, as she fled in her haste, he fell, and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth.

So this young boy was disabled by one of those tragic accidents that can so easily happen, as in an automobile crash today. In a hurry to get away from the enemies who would wipe out all the family of Saul, his nurse had accidentally dropped him. Mephibosheth escaped with his life, but we can only imagine what he had to endure as he grew up. Like the whispers behind his back: "Isn't it a shame about Mephibosheth? He might have been king of Israel but look at him—a cripple!" To be thus handicapped in that time and place was to be cursed—even, some would say, a victim of God's anger.

We hear nothing more of Mephibosheth until this ninth chapter of 2 Samuel. Jonathan's enemies didn't even bother with him as a potential danger. Clearly, he was no threat.

Then one day, when he was staying with one of his father's friends, a foreboding message reached him: "The king, King David, wants to see you." Mephibosheth may have thought, "Well, this is it; I knew they

couldn't let one of Saul's descendants go on living after the coup." So he was hoisted into the royal presence "lame in both his feet," perhaps expecting to be carried out shortly—dead.

David had inquired if there were any of Saul's family left. Yes, his men could supply the name of an old servant of Saul's, who could probably put them on the track of any remaining members of the family. So they drag in Ziba, and at that moment the story takes an extraordinary turn.

"And when they called him unto David, the king said unto him, 'Are you Ziba?'" And he said, "Your servant, sir." And the king said, "Is there any of Saul's family still alive, that I may show the kindness of God unto him?"

It may seem a bit late now for David to be remembering that promise to Jonathan, but the narrator has actually placed this remembrance of duty at the highest point in David's career, when he would have been most likely to forget the covenant that he had made with Jonathan, and certainly when he was least likely to need the help of anyone else.

And Ziba answered the king, "There is still a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in his feet." And the king said to him, "Where is he?" It was probably the first time in years that anyone had asked this question. Where is Mephibosheth? Who cared about him? So, into that rugged court of King David—the same David who had all but exterminated his family—into that court came this lame young man.

And he couldn't believe his ears. Calling him by his name, David said, "Mephibosheth!" And he answered, "Behold your servant!" And David said to him, "Do not fear: for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father, Jonathan, and will restore to you all the land of Saul your grandfather, and you shall eat at my table always." The answer of Mephibosheth reveals in one pathetic moment all he has been made to suffer. "And he bowed himself, and said, 'What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I?'"

But the kindness of God through the kindness of the king is shown to a lame lad. And there he was, not a "dead dog" but a live human being, a real person, restored to all the possessions that were rightfully his. He gains a secure income and is honored like the king's own sons. He is given what every courtier sought—the right of free access to the king's table. He is accepted, not as an object of the king's charity, but as he is: Mephibosheth,

the grandson of Saul, who just happens to be “lame in both his feet,” just as you and I might happen to be left-handed or bald or diabetic or arthritic or alcoholic or prone to depression.

Jesus’ blessing the little children is another example of kindness. Following his teaching about marriage and divorce, people were bringing little children for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples represented a traditional view, according to which children were accorded a low status in society and not permitted to fully participate in organized religion. Jesus will have none of it and demonstrates that children are just as valuable to God as grownups. He blesses them then and there.

William Barclay points out that it would have been the mothers who brought the children to Jesus. It was no wonder that they wished Jesus to lay his hands on their children. They had seen what his hands could do. They had seen them touch disease and pain away. They had seen them bring sight to blind eyes, and peace to distracted minds. And they wanted those same hands to touch their children.

“So Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem; for he ate always at the King’s table, although he was lame in both his feet.” The king’s table was indeed a sanctuary of protection. He who ate there with the king could not be defeated.

My friends, here is our Jerusalem; and here is the King’s table, at which we are invited continually to eat, like one of the King’s own children. Here is our sanctuary. And here we come limping along each Sunday seeking to receive God’s grace, his wholeness. Hearing God’s call to be instruments of his love and care for all God’s people. Proclaiming not only that you’re welcome here, but there’s a place for you here, just as there’s a place for you in God’s Kingdom. At God’s table.

In the name of the One who established a new covenant of grace, by his broken body and his shed blood—for us and our salvation. Amen.