

Community Church of Issaquah

March 12, 2023

From Kindness to Compassion

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Every parent really hopes that their child would have something nice to say about their mom or dad – actually, ANYthing nice to say. As a father, I have to confess that I used to latch onto any comment my son ever made that might be even slightly positive about me or my parenting skills. I don't know about other parents, but those seemed to be far and few between. Basically, I think most children look at their parents as lacking intelligence and are out of touch with reality. At least, that was my experience both as a son and as a father. If I could have collected one dollar every time my son said, "Dad, you just don't get it," I would have retired when I was 40. Sadly, though, I was never sure what the 'it' was that I was supposed to get. Does anyone know what that is? I'd love to know.

But once when my son was going to celebrate his 11th birthday, he shocked me with one compliment that has stuck with me the more than 30 years since he said it. He was living in Kansas with his mother after our divorce and I was here in Seattle. Since I could not be there for his birthday, I had asked a dear friend to take him out to dinner and present him with the new skateboard I had sent as his gift. During dinner, my friend Susan who was hosting asked him a question out of the blue. "Josh, what one word do you think describes your dad best?" If I had been there, I would have been sweating bullets waiting for

his answer. But when Susan reported this to me, she said his response was immediate. “Kind,” he said. “My dad is the kindest person I’ve ever met.” I was touched and a bit wet-eyed when she told me that, and I have never forgotten it.

Perhaps that has become my goal in my life – being kind. I suppose each of us wants to be thought of as a kind human being. It is something we all should aspire to. There are few human qualities or evidence of character more admirable than kindness. I believe every one of us wants to be kind and be treated with kindness. But the reality is that there are always varying levels of kindness and there are many ways of expressing it. The truth is, kindness is a part of our being, but acts of kindness are how we behave. Let me explain.

When I was growing up, my mother was a fanatic about manners. If I went to a friend’s house for a sleep-over, I was required to write what she called a “bread and butter note” to thank them. If I got a birthday gift, a thank you note had to be written immediately. If I spoke to an older person, I must always say “yes, ma’am” or “no sir.” I should open the door for a lady. Say “thank you” for even the smallest deed of thoughtfulness. Manners. There was always that question, “Where are your manners.” That’s behavior, the way we are taught to behave or express what we have been taught. We are taught that, or at least should be taught that our behavior gives evidence to our character.

The art of building character seems to have faded a bit during the times of the last two generations. Now I was born in 1945, the end of the Baby Boomers generation. It's the Gen X and Millennials that seem to struggle with this manners and behavior thing. I have one of each – a son in Gen X and a grandson in the millennials. I think my efforts to pass along what I learned in my childhood and youth about manners and behavior seems to have failed or at least fallen short. The evidence comes in experiences like this.

I send my son a box of casual shirts that I bought at Costco because I thought he would like them and they're the type of shirts he wears when not at work. The package was sent priority mail so it would arrive in 2 or 3 days. A couple of weeks went by without a word said, even though we had talked on the phone several times. Finally, I asked, "Did you get the shirts?" "Oh yeah, I like 'em." That was the short conversation about the shirts. Or I send my grandson a check for a couple hundred dollars thinking he could use it to stock up on groceries for his apartment or buy gas for trips to and from his wife's family in Helena. That was in September for their anniversary. Though he texts more than 2000 times a month (I know this because my son is an IT wiz and once monitored my grandson's text usage), he has never acknowledged it, though the check was cashed the day he got it.

Now don't get me wrong, I don't do these acts of kindness just for the recognition. I do it because I believe that my actions or behavior must be a reflection of what I believe to be my inner spirit of character. True, it would be nice if my

son and grandson would practice good manners, but that's not the point. The point is, we all need to be active in doing behavior that matches our beliefs. So, let me ask you this: do you engage in doing acts of kindness? Think about that for a minute. First, reflect on what you think is an act of kindness.

Saying "thank you to the cashier at Safeway" is a courtesy, not simply an act of kindness. Holding the door open for someone entering a building behind you is good manners, not simply an act of kindness. At the core of an act of kindness is this principle. You have recognized something you can do to reflect your desire to be kind. Send a birthday card or a get-well card to someone who is special to you. That's an act of kindness, though I think Hallmark is suffering from the lack of people who actually do that now. I think we mostly say, "I'll send an email." That's an act of kindness, too, though. You just don't get as many points for that as spending 63 cents for a stamp and \$4 for the card. Giving someone a ride to church. That's an act of kindness. Buying lunch for a friend just because you haven't seen them in a while and want to catch up. That's an act of kindness.

We all do these little acts often in our lives. But let's be clear here, just exercising good manners is not always an act of kindness, and an even larger concept is that acts of kindness are not always acts of compassion. The difference in those two is simple. If you identify a person (usually, it's a person), and you contemplate something you can do to help or change that person, that moves you from the level of kindness to compassion.

Not long ago I saw a little segment from an Ellen Degeneres show about a ten-year-old boy. The boy has a hearing loss and is required to wear a hearing aid. Though it isn't funny, several times his dog has chewed up the device and his parents had to buy new ones, which are not inexpensive. It dawned on the boy that there were other kids like him who couldn't even afford hearing aids, so he took his allowance savings and decided to buy one for someone else. He was so moved by that act of compassion that he set up a Go Fund Me online request for help buying hearing aids for kids who can't afford them. Thousands of dollars began to pour in for his cause, and one of the sponsors of Ellen's show gave a huge check for this effort. One boy with an inner belief of being kind is making a huge difference in his world because he chose to do a simple act of compassion.

There is an older retired gentleman who was looking for something to do to keep from being bored at home. He sought out opportunities to do some act of compassion, and found his answer. Two days a week, this older man goes to the children's hospital where he sits in a rocking chair in the neo-natal unit. For hours on end he cuddles babies and rocks them to give them a human touch and comfort. A few are there because their parents work and cannot be there all day. Some are there because they were premies and are waiting to grow a bit before going home. But there he sits, rocking babies, singing to them, kissing them and loving them. This is not because he has good manners or wants to be kind. It's a reflection of his heart and the fact that he saw a need and acted on it.

I know a friend who wanted to do something for a very close friend who is going through cancer treatment. So as an act of compassion, she accompanies this friend to her treatment and sits with her for the hours while the medicine is administered. That's a reflection of a heart that seeks for opportunities to do acts of compassion.

I shared a story in the Bell that I recall of an incident a woman experienced while riding a train on her way to her destination. As she sat half awake, she noticed a rather aged conductor coming down the aisle. His worn uniform spoke of a bygone day of passenger trains that his wrinkled face and slow step tried to deny. She wondered why he stopped and carefully picked up and refolded every discarded newspaper he passed. As he punched her ticket, his two big pockets seemed ready to burst with papers from almost every stop along the way.

He continued this for several hours and by the time the train had begun its long slow winding route through the hills of rural Alabama and Mississippi. She began to notice shanties and small cabins along the tracks and people standing on their porches as if they were waiting for something to happen. She glanced back down the tracks and saw white bundles being thrown from the train. She immediately knew what was happening and hurried to the opening between cars and there stood the conductor – delivering yesterday's papers to these little cabins. People waved or nodded as the train passed and the paper was delivered, and then it rounded another curve and they were out of sight. Would you call that an act of compassion?

Within this very congregation I could name so many of you who are currently doing acts of compassion. I don't want to embarrass anyone. That's not my intention. But I want us all to see what happens every day. I personally know a son who moved in with his mother to care for her during health problems. I know some grandparents who have taken on the role of parenting their grandchildren. I could go on, but I think you get my message. Good manners, courtesies, and small acts of kindness are wonderful things to see and to practice. But my challenge to you is to move above those and begin to practice acts of compassion. Find someone or others who need to experience the love, kindness and compassion that you have in your heart as taught to us by Christ. These opportunities are all around us. They are in our neighborhoods. They are in this church.

I definitely want us to be kind to each other. There is enough meanness in this world already. I want us to be thoughtful and courteous to each other. I want us to do acts of kindness. But I also want us to seek more ways to do acts of compassion in our lives. I want each of us to be a Good Samaritan in our lives. I want to live up to my son's belief that I'm the kindest person he has ever known, but I also want someone to be able to say when I die, "he really did some good acts of compassion. Nice going, Vincent." Put that in my obituary. It could replace the old idea I had which said simply, "I told you I was sick."