

Before Kindness
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 29, 2023
The Rev. Katherine Bush

“Before you know what kindness really is / you must lose things.” So says poet Naomi Shihab Nye. “Before you know what kindness really is / you must lose things... Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,/ you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.” Micah tells us that we must do justice and love kindness, and there are some prerequisites it seems. Before we can love kindness, we must know kindness, and before we can know what kindness really is, we must lose things and we must be acquainted with sorrow. Loving kindness is, perhaps, the prerequisite to doing justice. And this is a time for doing justice, just like it was a time for doing justice last year, and ten years ago, and one hundred years ago, and one thousand years ago, and if Micah and his peers are to be trusted, so it was also the time for doing justice twenty-five hundred years ago. Which is to say that it's always the time.

But before anyone in any time can do justice, we must love kindness, and the poet said that “before you know what kindness really is / you must lose things... Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,/ you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.” This is the road we have been traveling on in Memphis of late. We have lost much. We lost a young man named Tyre Nichols, an artist who was “just trying to get home” earlier this month. For some of us in this loss, we also lost the scales over our eyes, showing us a world of violence and brokenness that we hadn't previously known. It's also true that for many of us, this was not the moment when brutality and hurt first revealed themselves. We already knew all about it, and we were already grieving and sorrowful for the toll of sin and cruelty that threads our homes and our neighborhoods and our city and our world.

Before we look for kindness, we must look closely at the sorrow and the pain. Maybe for you this meant watching minutes of a grainy video. Maybe for you this means looking at your own scars. Or this means rubbing the place where you feel the ache of death and dis-ease. This means reading the news for the embedded narrative of cold power and injustice. Before loving kindness, this means sitting in profoundly uncomfortable conversations and in profoundly uncomfortable silence. Before we practice kindness, you and I rehearse all that you've lost, all that I've lost, grieving all that others have lost; grieving alongside God who is confounded at our lost-ness. In how many ways and how often do we forget that God brought us up from the land of Egypt and redeemed us from the house of slavery? Before we know kindness we must look around at the desolate landscape* and acknowledge how lost we are - even in the promised land.

And then, kindness. It might seem like kindness is not enough for this moment, but be clear that Micah isn't talking about a namby-pamby type of politeness and mild consideration to hold the door for someone. This *hesed*, this loving-kindness is robust and muscular; it means great mercy, faithful commitment, inconvenient compassion, a zealotry for the well-being of the other. Micah means, I think, “the deepest thing inside.” What is good, o mortal, is a deep and rich kindness that is the foundation of justice. When genuine affection guides our actions, when

understanding the story of those on the road home with us shapes our steps, then justice begins to look like something God might have dreamed of for us. Then justice looks more like mending what is ripped and torn with tender stitches precisely because we know what it's like to be torn to shreds.

And there's another window on this kind-ness that preacher Edwin Johnson opened for me a week or so ago at a conference on formation. He said this kindness is ultimately about recognizing a shared likeness, kind-ness: in that we're all the same kind. We confounding mortals are so much alike, our stories so interchangeable; so much the same kind of fractured and beautiful creatures, so much the same kind of children of God. We are the same kind, you and I. We look at sunsets and wish we could capture the grandeur. We are the same kind. We are all just trying to get home to share a meal with someone who loves us. We are also the same kind of people who don't know what to do with our anger and our fear. We are the same kind of people who lash out in violence, with words or with fists. We are the same kind of people who abuse our power - whether we have a little or a lot. We're the same as the kind who come to church and the same as the kind who march on the bridge. We are the same, all the same kind of people.

"Before you know what kindness really is / you must lose things... Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,/ you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing." All of us share this capacity to lose things and all of us, at some point in our lives, come to know sorrow as the other deepest thing. Bearing witness to the sorrow and the loss in our own quiet lives and the shared despair of our community is the beginning of real *hesed*, of loving-kindness, of the other deepest thing. Dwelling with our loss brings us to a place where "it is only kindness that makes sense anymore."

So, if you have spent any time this week grieving and feeling overwhelmed with the size of sorrows* borne in our city, you are doing the hard, heart work from which kindness grows. If you have imagined a mother's anguish, if you have had misgivings about the exercise of power, if you have been in touch with fear and even despair, this is what comes before kindness. Or maybe while the whole world has been talking about this tragedy, another tragedy is unfolding in your little world that few even know about, and you have to wake up to your own sorrow*. This too is what comes before kindness. This presence to pain is what shapes us to be more merciful and forgiving; this is what precedes a deep curiosity about how things could be different. And this is indeed the time for mercy, forgiveness, and a vast imagination for what could be different, as it always is.

In this loss, in this and every time of sorrow, we are called by God to be changed for good. Mortals, from our pain we called toward a fervent and unflinching care for those around us who are just like us, suffering and aching for tenderness. This is what is required: that we get up from this place of grief and walk with humility toward a reimagined and different world, a just world, a world that knows what kindness really is.

More than just the quoted lines, this sermon owes much to "Kindness" by Naomi Shihab Nye. It's worth a read <https://poets.org/poem/kindness>