

Welcome

A lot of you know that I'm originally from the Midwest, and we just hit our SIX year anniversary of being Texans. Since we've been here, we've gotten passes to the State Fair, learned to smoke brisket and started unironically using 'y'all'. I don't know if that makes us true Texans or not. But there's one other phrase we had to learn to really thrive here in Texas and that's "Bless Your Heart".

'Bless your heart' is what Texans say when you're about to say instead of saying something mean. Like if someone says they don't know what a tractor pull is, you go, "Oh! Well bless your heart." And what you mean by that is, "Wow, you need some culture!"

"Bless your heart" is the most obvious form of what I've heard called "Texas nice". It wasn't a new concept for me because in the Midwest, we have 'Midwest nice'. And they're the same sort of thing. They're a public-facing façade, the embodiment of, "If you don't have something *nice* to say, don't say anything at all."

We're going to talk about niceness today. At its best, nice serves an admirable purpose. Nice is basically minding your own business. That person has a silly hat on, one you wouldn't be caught dead in. Who cares? Do you *need* to say something to them? Probably not. So you keep it to yourself, maybe mumble a "bless their heart" under your breath and move on. Nice is a way of keeping the peace.

The problem, however, is when we can't differentiate when to be nice and when to be honest. We struggle to know when to speak up and when it's okay to just move on. A friend engaged in self-harming behavior doesn't need a "bless your heart". It's probably necessary to confront that family member who makes racist jokes.

Yikes. That already feels scary, doesn't it? We're going to talk about the difference today between nice and kind. We too often treat them as synonyms, but the differences are profound and important.

Nice is a movement that preserves a superficial peace. Kind insists on deeper, truer and more honest relationships. And as God's people, we're called not to be *nice* to one another, but to be *kind*.

So today is about how to be kind. And we're able to be kind to one another first and foremost because God is kind to us. In fact, we'll hear from the Scriptures today that it's God's *kindness* toward us that leads us to repent and be in relationship with God.

So let's begin by celebrating and worshiping this God who loves us and whose kindness leads us all to be a spiritual family together.

Message

I don't know if you're aware, but there's an election in just under a month. Kidding - I don't know that you can live anywhere in this country right now and not be aware that the election is fast approaching. And the refrain I've heard over and over is, "Wow, I didn't think it could get worse than 2016." We're

experiencing this election as one of deep divisions, and as if a global pandemic wasn't enough, we're bearing the stress of a divided nation.

So for the next four weeks leading up to the election, we're exploring how to survive the election. We're going to explore for experiences we all have as we navigate this season. And we're going to ask, "How do we follow Jesus through this season? What does it look like to bear Jesus' image faithfully as we live together in these next couple of months?"

A couple of disclaimers: this is not going to be a partisan series. The Church has never and will never endorse candidates or parties. Politics is about how we live together, and the Church is deeply political - that "love your neighbor the same way you love yourself" command is a political statement because it's about how we live together. But political and partisan are not the same thing. So while we're going to talk in this series about how we navigate the complex world of relationships, we're not going to endorse candidates or parties or tell you how to vote.

Second, this is going to be a series that asks a lot of us. You'll see it today when we dive into the difference between 'kind' and 'nice'. We believe that real relationships are deep relationships. Catalyst doesn't settle for superficial. So we're going to have to get real - with ourselves, with God and with each other.

So let's begin with those two words we so easily mix up: nice and kind. More and more, we hear lamenting for the loss of niceness (though we often call it 'civility'). Anytime someone criticizes anyone publicly, the nice police come out. We accuse those who speak up of causing divisions, of making trouble where there wasn't any before.

Niceness is fundamentally about superficial relationships. Calls for niceness happen when a surface level calm is disturbed. It's true - it's actually in the etymology of the word. "Nice" comes from a Latin word that meant 'ignorance'. In Middle English, nice most commonly meant 'stupid'. It could also mean 'reserved', as in 'not showing your whole self'. All that points to the common current usage of nice: it's a surface-level good.

Which, again, isn't *nothing*. If I have to choose between someone who's nice and someone who's rude, I'd probably rather interact with the nice person. If I know someone doesn't like me and we're going to be in the same room together, I'd likely prefer they be nice to me than mean. But we've all done that, right? We've chosen to be *nice* in a space where we didn't agree or like someone. It's not that we were being fake (in the best case scenario). It's just that we chose the superficial calm of niceness as the greater good.

Nice isn't nothing. But for our most important relationships - our close family, our friends, our church family - we can't *stop* at nice.

Because Jesus calls us into more than surface level relationships and surface-level community. If we want our faith to be truly transformative, we must insist on diving in deep, and that means being comfortable with things getting uncomfortable.

We need more than nice. We need KIND. The English word 'kind' comes to us from the world of family relationships. It's literally "kin-ness" - treating someone like family (in the sense that, no matter what happens, we're still in this together).

The Hebrew word we translate 'kind' pushes this even further: it's the word *chesed*, and it covers not just family relationships but people with whom we've entered into a covenant. People we've made into family. And the word is most often used of God - that God is *faithful* to us even when we aren't. God holds up God's end of the deal even when we don't fulfill ours.

And I'm probably most provoked by the Greek word we translate kindness: it's a word that comes from the root that means 'useful'. To be kind to someone (in Greek) carries the sense of doing a good for them. Adding value to their life. Improving them.

None of these senses can happen when our only concern is a superficial calm. Because we're all flawed. None of us has a purely true perspective. We need each other to see our blind spots, the places where we're wrong, the ways we hurt others without intention.

Sometimes KIND isn't NICE. Because kind isn't concerned with a shallow, superficial calm. Kind seeks true good, deep transformation.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Mark 10. I want to look at two back-to-back encounters in Jesus' life that illustrate his concern for kindness, not niceness. Neither of these encounters is particularly "nice". If they happened today, Jesus would likely be reprimanded for being uncivil. But I want to look at the nature of the encounters, and how Jesus is inviting those with whom he's engaging into a deeper, truer relationship with him.

One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could touch and bless them. But the disciples scolded the parents for bothering him.

When Jesus saw what was happening, he was angry with his disciples. He said to them, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn't receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." Then he took the children in his arms and placed his hands on their heads and blessed them. -- Mark 10:13-16

We're not sure what exactly Jesus was doing that day - teaching? Playing games? Making a meal? All we know is that some parents showed up with their kids, and they wanted Jesus to bless their kids. The disciples took it up on themselves to protect Jesus from this distraction. We can imagine their scolding,

right? "Don't you know who he is? He's a very busy, important teacher. Quit bothering him with these screaming, snotting kids!"

But when Jesus noticed what was happening, he was *mad*. And he rebuked them, called them out in front of everyone and corrected them, then came over to the kids and blessed them.

If you were the disciples, that probably didn't feel very nice. I can imagine how they felt - embarrassed, probably angry now for different reasons. So why did Jesus do it?

Because his followers were abusing their power. As his insiders, they had appointed themselves guardians of access to Jesus. And they were barring children - the vulnerable and overlooked from Jesus.

So yes, Jesus' actions were a kindness to the children (it's one of the reasons we love Jesus so much, and why this story in particular is so beloved). But his words were *also* a kindness to the disciples. Because they were most certainly *not* receiving God's kingdom like little children. They had propped themselves up as little rulers. This ethic was forming them *away* from who Jesus is. So Jesus corrected them. Not to shame them, but out of love.

The next story reveals the very real danger posed by the disciples' attitude. These are two stories Mark put back to back to comment on each other. Remember Jesus' words about only entering the kingdom as a child as we read about his encounter with this wealthy man:

As Jesus was starting out on his way to Jerusalem, a man came running up to him, knelt down, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked. "Only God is truly good. But to answer your question, you know the commandments: 'You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. You must not cheat anyone. Honor your father and mother.'"

"Teacher," the man replied, "I've obeyed all these commandments since I was young."

Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him. "There is still one thing you haven't done," he told him. "Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

At this the man's face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions. -- Mark 10:17-22

There's a lot of debate about exactly why Jesus tells this man to sell all his possessions. But all of that aside, what's clear is that Jesus recognized this man's wealth was keeping him in some essential way from that childlike faith - did you note that the man insisted he had kept all God's commandments "since I was young"? That sounds good until we consider that what he means is that he considers himself mature - no longer childlike.

But Jesus said it's that very childlikeness that makes us fit to enter God's kingdom.

So Jesus gave him an ultimatum: sell your possessions and come follow me.

Again, you can imagine the response of the people watching. The collective gasp. What did Jesus just say to him? Can't he see the nice threads he's wearing? Is Jesus joking? And, above all, *that's not very nice*. After all, this guy came to Jesus in good faith. And think of all the good he could do for Jesus' ministry! The building he could fund. The prestige a guy like him would bring!

But Jesus isn't interested in the superficial successes this guy would bring. Jesus isn't concerned about his own well-being at all. Did you catch *why* Jesus said what he did?

Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him.

Jesus said what he did out of genuine love. He saw something in this man and his attachment to his *stuff* that was keeping him from receiving Jesus the way those children did (and again, we could debate all day about exactly what). So Jesus called him out.

Not to be cruel. Not to shame or embarrass. But as an act of love. Jesus saw the man's genuine desire to follow him. He also saw the man couldn't - not as he was. So in an act of kindness, Jesus called out the man's idol - his wealth.

Friends, if we want to be in authentic relationship with one another, the kind of community God created, Jesus restored and the Holy Spirit makes possible among us, we have to quit settling for nice.

When we see siblings using their position to exclude and oppress, we have to speak up - both for the sake of those who are being oppressed and for the sake of those who are oppressing.

And when we see idols in our siblings' lives, we have to call them out. Not because we want to be better than our siblings, but because they are our kin, and we have great love for them.

So with that in mind, let me give you a couple of specific tips on kindness during this next month:

1. It's okay to draw boundaries. A lot of us are stretched super thin. We don't have much emotional margin. SO we may not be in a place where we can engage others with kindness. I'm giving you permission right now to say, "I can't talk about this right now." You can tell your family that, your friends, your co-workers, whoever. It takes emotional energy to choose to be kind, and if you can't do it right now, it's okay to say that.

2. Before you engage someone, ask if you're looking at them the same way Jesus looked at that young man who came to him. Can you say that what's motivating you is genuine love? If not, this is something

to take to God in your prayer. Ask God to help you love this person the way God does. Ask Jesus to help you see them the way he does.

3. If you're speaking up on behalf of someone else - like Jesus did for those kids, are you trying to be right, to score points, to shame? Or are you standing up for others? And are you working, like Jesus did with his disciples, for the good of both the victims *and* the victimizers?

I have to be honest, friends: kindness is *hard*. Niceness is much easier, which I think is why it's so much more prevalent. But nice never changed anyone. We can be nice and still be cruel. We can be nice and still be racist or misogynist or homophobic. We can be nice and still be sinful.

Which is why Paul reminds us that we weren't saved by God's cruelty but God's kindness toward us:

You may think you can condemn such people, but you are just as bad, and you have no excuse! When you say they are wicked and should be punished, you are condemning yourself, for you who judge others do these very same things. And we know that God, in his justice, will punish anyone who does such things. Since you judge others for doing these things, why do you think you can avoid God's judgment when you do the same things? Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin? -- Romans 2:1-4

God's kindness saves us, friends. So too, God sends us into the world to be not nice, but kind. God sends us not to settle for superficial connections but to insist on authentic, deep relationships.

No matter what happens next month, we have a difficult road ahead. We can't navigate that road with shallow faith. We need the deep faith, a kind faith, to be the church our city and our culture needs.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us all to the table - tax collectors and zealots and betrayers and deniers.

1. When in the last week have I shown kindness?
2. When in the last week have I settled for nice?
3. When in the next week might I settle for nice?
4. How can I choose to be kind this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Kindness Examine