

Parallel Paths: “My Religion is Kindness”
Galatians 5:22-23

We’ve been walking this summer on paths that run parallel to the path of Jesus. We come today to another winner of the Nobel Peace Prize—this time in 1989—the Dalai Lama. Tenzin Gyatso, he was born, in 1935, to parents who were farmers in Tibet. They already had several children. When he was two years old, a search party of Buddhist officials found him. They laid out some objects in front of this toddler, and when he picked out for himself the same things that had belonged to the previous Dalai Lama, they announced that they had found the reincarnation of the thirteen Dalai Lamas who had come before him, the first in 1642. He was enthroned before he turned four.

The Dalai Lama is the leader of Tibetan Buddhists all over the world. Until the 1950’s, the Dalai Lamas were also the political heads of state in Tibet. But Tibet is now part of the People’s Republic of China. It has no independent government. So this Dalai Lama lives in exile. He is not permitted to go inside Tibet; he has been away from his homeland since 1959.

And while we think of the Dalai Lama as a religious figure, he is also a political leader; he has led—from exile—Tibet’s battle to gain some level of autonomy from the Chinese government. His Nobel Peace Prize was awarded for his consistent opposition to the use of violence in the Tibetan campaign for independence.

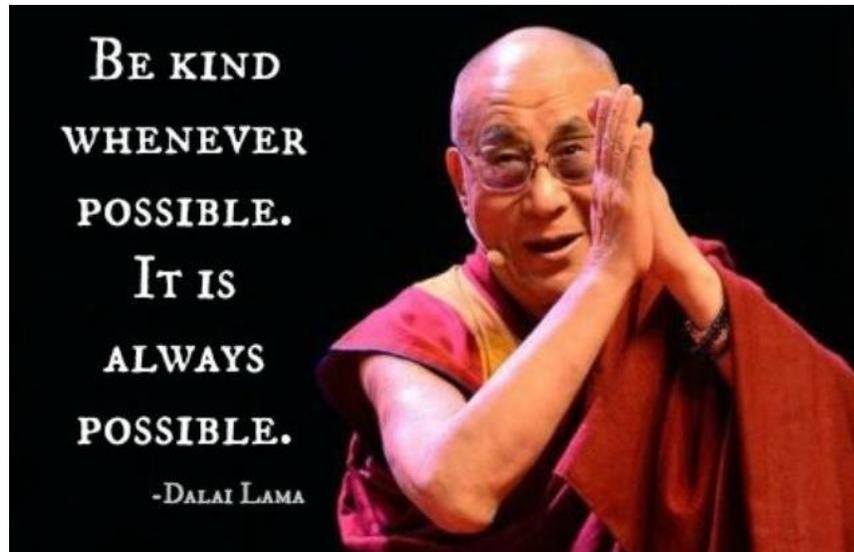
The Dalai Lama, though, has always found a way to integrate his religious practice and his politics. In his acceptance speech for the peace prize, he said,

“As a Buddhist monk, my concern extends to all members of the human family...I believe all suffering is caused by ignorance. People inflict pain on others in the selfish pursuit of their happiness or satisfaction. Yet true happiness comes from a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood. We need to cultivate a universal responsibility for one another and the planet we share. Although I have found my own Buddhist religion helpful in generating love and compassion, even for those we consider our enemies [sound familiar?], I am convinced that everyone can develop a good heart and a sense of universal responsibility— with or without religion.”

And indeed, the Dalai Lama has been a source of inspiration and a force for peace well beyond the boundaries of Buddhism. I have not seen him in person, but I have heard from others who have been in his presence that even in a big stadium or theater, he radiates peace. Here’s how he describes his philosophy:

I believe that the very purpose of life is to be happy. When you recognize that all beings are equal and like yourself in both their desire for happiness and their right to obtain it, you automatically feel empathy and closeness for them. You develop a feeling of responsibility for others: the wish to help them actively overcome their problems. True compassion is not just an emotional response but a firm commitment founded on reason. Therefore, a truly compassionate attitude towards others does not change even if they behave negatively.

This attitude leads him toward kindness as a practice, a way of life. *My religion is very simple*, the Dalai Lama has said. *My religion is kindness.*



We might as well be listening to the voice of Jesus. The Jesus who stopped to pay attention to people who were too sick or too poor or too *bad* in some way that mattered then to be counted, or even seen. The Jesus who said, “Here’s the whole thing, all you have to remember: take care of your neighbor in the same way you take care of yourself.”

When you think about it, kindness doesn’t require any particular set of beliefs behind it. It means the same thing whether it’s Jesus who’s talking about it, or the Dalai Lama, or the novelist George Saunders. We all have some sense of what it means to be kind. We all, I would bet, remember a moment when someone went out of their way to be extraordinarily kind to us.

But really, what is an act of kindness? What does it mean to be kind? First, let me say what I think kindness is *not*. Kindness is not the same thing as *niceness*. I suppose it’s all about definitions, but niceness, it seems to me, is passive. To be *nice* is to act in a way that doesn’t offend anyone, but that also doesn’t require you to *do* something. Kindness is something else. Kindness asks something of us. It requires something. Maybe three things.

First, you have to be willing to stop whatever it was you were doing, or were on your way to do, or already late for. You have to pause long enough to notice other people around you—not just to see that they’re there so you don’t crash into them, but long enough to see that someone else is struggling, or that they could use your encouragement or your help.

Honestly, I’m preaching to myself here. I walk fast. I know I walk fast. I get wherever I need to go next as quickly as possible so that I can be efficient and productive. I’m often frustrated with anything that slows me down—a chatty clerk at the grocery store, a leisurely driver in front of me. I have no

doubt that I pass through many situations, every day, where I could lighten someone else's load. It's not that I don't want to; I don't even see them.

The practice of kindness requires a different posture. Less focus on getting things done; more attentiveness, a willingness to be interrupted, a readiness to take a detour off the path you thought you were on for this day. It means noticing and moving toward someone else; changing direction, even for a few moments, trusting that the situation in front of you, the one in which you can do something for someone else, might be more important than your own agenda.

Second, the practice of kindness requires that you extend yourself—open your heart—to actually see and hear another person, and then to move toward them with compassion and empathy. Many of us learned as young children what we call the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. (You know it's an ancient rule, because it uses words like "unto".) Anthropologists have discovered that some form of that rule exists in virtually every culture. But when you think about it, there's an assumption built into that rule: that everyone else thinks and asks and needs the same things you do.

Often that's true. The rule works well in homogeneous communities, where the people are similar to one another. But today, we can't really make that assumption. Our communities are too diverse. We are all human, *and* we are different. In *this* world, there is something more required of us to live compassionately and kindly. We need today what some people have called the "Platinum Rule": Do unto others not as you would have done to you, but as *they* would want done to them. Do you hear the difference? There's another step required there: a step of listening with your ears attuned to hear someone else's experience, their way of seeing and being in the world, which might be quite different from your own. It means you don't discount a different way of thinking as crazy or weird. Real kindness seeks out the places where we can touch each other even when we are not the same. It's not so intuitive; it takes a little harder work.

And maybe that is the third requirement of the practice of kindness: a willingness to spend something of yourself. Kindness—unlike niceness—costs something. It requires a loosening of our grasp around the things that matter to us. Sometimes the cost can be measured in dollars; sometimes in the expenditure of time; sometimes in risk, the willingness to put ourselves in danger for someone else.

There was a news story about two years ago that has really stuck with me. On August 22, 2013, just as the school year was beginning, a young man burst his way in to the front office of a school in Atlanta with an AK 47, ready to shoot children and adults in one of those unexplainable acts of violence that happens way too often. A young woman named Antoinette Tuff, who worked part-time as a bookkeeper at the school, was working at her desk. She must have been terrified, but she didn't run away or hide under her desk. She looked that terrorist right in the eye and she saw someone who was desperate and afraid, sick of his life, hopeless. And so she talked to him. She talked and talked. She asked him about his life. She listened to his story, this man who was nothing like her. The 911 recording that was taping everything they said reveals that she said this to the frightening—and frightened—young man:

"It's going to be all right, sweetie, I just want you to know I love you, though, OK? And I'm proud of you. That's a good thing that you're just giving up and don't worry about it. We all go through something in life... You going to be OK. I thought the same thing, you know, I tried to

commit suicide last year after my husband left me. But look at me now. I'm still working and everything is OK."

When they finished talking, the man put his gun down and surrendered to the police. While everyone else was jumping around worried about their own safety—justifiably—this woman reached out to another person—the one who was on the other side of a gun. She risked not only her life, but looking like a fool—who would think sharing your emotional problems was appropriate at a time like this? But she recognized something human even in a dangerous person at a dangerous moment, and she connected—with kindness.

The Apostle Paul calls kindness a “fruit of the spirit”—along with love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, generosity, faithfulness, self-control. Here’s what I think he was trying to say by using that image: You don’t manufacture fruit. You grow it. You take care of the tree that produces the fruit—you plant it in a place where it can grow deep roots; you water it; you make sure that the pests don’t settle in and take over. And then you watch it grow and produce. A good tree produces good fruit. Kindness grows in us, grows *from* us, while our lives are deepening in good soil, growing strong roots, occupying the place that has been given to us in the orchard. A kind act comes naturally out of a soft heart.

And yet, there is a way in which kindness is a practice, a way of being in the world that requires intentionality and discipline. We decide to be kind; we do kind things. Like so many parts of the spiritual life, kindness is a matter of both intention and transformation...no matter what your religion, no matter what path you are walking on.