

“An Ounce of Kindness”

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This week's *Christian Century* includes a small item from Beliefnet.com that lists five of the most influential Jewish men in history.

1. Moses, who said the law is everything.
2. Jesus, who said love is everything.
3. Marx, who said capital is everything.
4. Freud, who said sex is everything.
5. And Einstein, who said everything is relative.

But when we need some precious kindness from a dear one or a special friend or, on an unexpected occasion, from a perfect stranger, there's nothing better or more religious than an ounce of kindness. Kindness can often be everything – and that's a quote from Edward Cohn, who is certainly not among the influential Jewish men in history.

The tender scene we read from the Book of Ruth is one of my very favorites. It reminds us of the crucial difference that human compassion and kindness can make at any given moment of life.

After the death of her husband, Eli Melech, and that of her two precious sons, Naomi gratefully and lovingly bid her daughters-in-law to return to their ancestral homes with her blessing. Naomi countered the reluctant women and their hesitance to depart with hard-nosed realism. She asked them,

“Have I yet sons in my womb that they may be your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way...”

With ultimate reluctance, Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth refused to leave. Denying Naomi's urgent plea that Ruth place her own best interest at the fore, Ruth replied with one of scripture's most poignant supplications:

“Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God; where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.”

Here, in Ruth, a happy ending and abundant examples of kindness express the flowering of human love. Typically, we quip that no good deed goes unpunished. However, the record stands clear: the Book of Ruth proves that good deeds and kindnesses done are not always punished.

Were we still in need of any other scriptural support of the indispensable centrality of kindness to genuine religious living, we would need only to turn to the prophet Micah. This 7<sup>th</sup> century, pre-Christian, prophet once attempted to teach his contemporaries what God expects of those who want to live acceptable lives. Micah's people ask themselves:

Will we need to bring burnt offerings? Will God  
expect thousands of rams or 10,000 rivers of oil.  
Is it infanticide God wants: the fruit of my body  
for the sin of my soul?

Bluntly put, what would it take to buy off an angry, demanding deity and to get right with God?

Once again, scripture replies with one of the simplest, most direct, and challenging descriptions of the essence of human goodness:

It hath been told thee, O man, what is good and what  
the Lord doth require of thee: only to do justly, to love  
acts of human kindness, and to walk humbly with  
thy God.

Here's a further list of human kindnesses that are included in the daily prayer service of Judaism. The ancient rabbi believed that anyone that observed these kindnesses would be rewarded with life here on Earth, and then, in the world to come. Are you ready?

1. Honoring one's father and mother.
2. Performing random acts of kindness.
3. Being hospitable to one's guests.
4. Visiting the sick.
5. Celebrating with a bride and groom.
6. Accompanying the dead to their grave.
7. And finally, making peace between those who are quarreling.

I find all other presumptions of genuine faithfulness more or less useless if we fail to treat one another with justice, compassion and kindness. You see, God uses us as his eyes and ears. We are His loving heart and saving arms. We serve God best by bringing kindness into the world.

The other day, I heard of a little boy who once prayed: "Dear God, make all the bad people good and the good people nice.

Being genuinely nice is a religious act. We're talking the Golden Rule here. It doesn't get more basic than that.

Years ago, I met a lady in a congregation (far from here) who promised me, “Like it or not Rabbi, every week I’ll tell you after your sermon the way I see it.”

Oh boy. I could hardly wait. A well-known Protestant preacher in New York City once told of a woman who came up to him in the receiving line after the worship service to report to him one of her talents. She said, “I have a gift of criticism.”

Some gift, huh? On a recent MSNBC *Ethical Edge* broadcast, the panel members were asked whether it’s always necessary to tell the full truth. Can you be ethical and not always be 100% honest? I had about 3.5 seconds to figure out that answer, but I remembered Emily Dickinson’s valuable admonition: “Tell the truth, but tell it slant.”

Every one of us has, on occasion, abused “the truth” as a vicious and unkind weapon. Any of you old married couples here know what I am speaking of. That’s why you survived to become *old* married couples!

Perhaps these words of Marguerite Wilkinson, in her poem entitled, “Guilty,” might remind of us of some of our own lesser moments:

I never cut my neighbor’s throat;  
My neighbor’s gold I never stole;  
I never spoiled his house or land;  
But God have mercy on my soul.  
For I am haunted night and day  
By all the deeds I have not done;  
O unattempted loveliness!  
O costly valor never won!

Ruth had no intention of leaving Naomi to the whims of fate. She showed valor and dedication to a sense of protective kindness. But I’m not only thinking, this morning, about such dramatic life choices. Imagine, just for a few moments, how much more gracious and pleasant life under our own roofs, let alone within this Crescent City, could become with a little more kindness and old fashioned civility.

I’m talking, “Excuse me, I’m sorry, please, and thank you.” I’m talking about a few open doors and a few closed mouths and, while you’re at it, turn down the volume on your car radio.

Kindness takes human empathy! How would we feel if we were in another person’s fix? Instead of glorying in their humiliation, wouldn’t a religious person want to prevent another’s pain and protect their dignity? We embarrass our lover, our child, our parents, our employee, our friend or neighbor when we fail to be kind. And that’s a dirty, rotten sin.

Years ago, when we were very new here in New Orleans, our children were in the first and sixth grade at Newman. A newly arrived clergy family receives many, many

invitations from thoughtful, generous congregants. Some include the children, and others are for adults only. Some events are dressy, and others are informal. Well, shortly after moving in, my wife Andrea became ill and was briefly hospitalized for a few weeks for a routine condition. And that put me in charge of the social and domestic details, as well as the Temple. And believe me, we were confused, as the following account illustrates.

Informally dressed with both children in hand, I showed up at a Sunday night dinner, only to be admitted by a butler in white tie to a candlelit, formal table. What an entrance! It was an historic first impression, to say the least! The hostess literally sized up the situation in about three seconds and, in the blink of an eye, gathered two small chairs at the tableside, had places set with child appropriate plates, and everybody lightened the entire mood of the gathering. You see what happened? We were the beneficiaries that night of such profound kindness, inspiring selflessness, and sacred grace.

She's gone on now to glory, that wonderful woman, but she became a dear and trusted friend. And, the children and I will never forget that night when she so warmly welcomed us to her table. As far as I'm concerned, her seat in Heaven was reserved because of that one occasion. An ounce of kindness – it's the inability to remain at ease in the presence of another person who is ill at ease.

An ounce of kindness – it's the inability to have peace of mind when something troubles another, and you know full well that their remedy is within your grasp. What do we live for, we frail and vulnerable children of the living God, if not to make life less difficult for another? Let me tell you another story – a story about two rabbis who lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> century: Rabbi Shammai and Rabbi Hillel. Well, a mischievous Pagan – a Roman troublemaker – showed up at Rabbi Shammai's house one night right at dinnertime. When the Rabbi answered the door, the fellow taunted the great sage, "Rabbi, teach me the entire Torah while I stand here balanced on one foot." Shammai was not known for his tolerance. He did not suffer fools happily. Outraged by such an insulting and ignorant request, he slammed the door in the man's face. The next night, right at dinnertime, the very same mischievous Roman Pagan showed up at Rabbi Hillel's home. Hillel answered the door, only to find the man daring the famous rabbi to teach him the Torah while he stood on one foot. But, rather than slam the door in his face, do you know what Hillel did? Rabbi Hillel looked the man in the eyes and patiently advised him,

What is hateful to you, do not do unto your  
neighbor. All the rest is commentary. Now go  
home and practice it."

I think you and I should do the same! Let's take that good advice of Rabbi Hillel home with us today. What is hateful to you, do not do unto your neighbor. Poet John O'Reilly offers us the final word – listen:

What is real Good?  
I asked in musing mood.

Order, said the law court;  
Knowledge, said the school;  
Truth, said the wise man;  
Pleasure, said the fool.  
Love, said a maiden;  
Beauty, said a page,  
Freedom, said the dreamer;  
Home, said the sage;  
Fame, said the soldier;  
Equity, the seer –  
Spake my heart full sadly,  
'The answer is not here.'  
Then within my bosom  
Softly this I heard:  
'Each heart holds the secret;  
Kindness is the word.'

Amen