

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
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Nice Is Not Enough

Writing a sermon seems pretty easy. Modern American life is so violent, so brutal, so inhuman—as anyone who has watched the news, driven on the beltway, or dealt with automated customer service can tell you. Simply keeping it together is a daily task, and an act of kindness can appear as a kind of revolution. The Christian preacher has only to tell you that, once upon a time, there was Jesus, a nice guy who taught us all to be a little nicer. The Church carries on His nice work of being a little nicer to everyone. You encourage everyone to at least consider being nicer this week because being nice makes the world a better place. Sermons are simply 10-minute variations on this theme, at which point we—the few, the proud, the nice—can all go home and watch football.

The world could use some more nice, so, please, do be nice this week.

But...

Today's Gospel tells us that a good sermon is the kind of thing that can get you killed. In a prefiguring of his eventual arrest and crucifixion, Jesus' synagogue attempts to toss him off a cliff after he confronts the assembly with some difficult truths. Sermons and Christian life in general aren't so easy, then, for we Christians do not preach "nice."

Nice is a faith so incomplete it is false. We don't preach nice. We preach love and, come to that, love that "bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things." Before you and I can preach the good news of God in Jesus Christ, we must first confront the bad news, the more difficult news, of God in Jesus Christ: that being nice is not enough.

Today's readings reveal how God often goes outside the respectable usual suspects—the nice people—to reveal God's will among the outcast, the vulnerable, and the powerless.

The great King David had two high priests, Abiathar and Zadok, incidentally the first and last names in the temple clergy directory. Upon David's death, Zadok supported Solomon's claim to the throne while Abiathar supported a rival. For this, he and his followers were exiled to a place called Anathoth.

Generations later, when God saw how temple worship had become corrupt, God looked to a descendant of Abiathar, to Jeremiah, a priest in Anathoth, and appointed him over nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and plant anew.

God knows how we rationalize our violence, how we cover our sins with the veneer of respectability, and so God sends prophets to open our unseeing eyes and unfeeling hearts, to shock us and the system awake.

Like Jeremiah, Jesus was sent to pluck and pull down, destroy and overthrow, to build and plant. When Jesus enters the synagogue and speaks, all are amazed and speak well of him. These synagogue-going folks are, in a word, nice. But Jesus sees how their niceness conceals

their cynicism, their hypocrisy, their corruption, their greed, their cruelty and eventually their violence. And he commits the ultimate preaching transgression—he points that out—and he reminds them that their niceness is not enough.

Jesus says that the great prophets Elijah and Elisha did not work miracles among the nice—they were sent instead to Zarephath in Sidon, to Naaman, a Syrian. That is, they weren't sent to the nice people; they were sent to foreigners. And it was that reminder—that the assembly's presumed niceness at worst served their sins and at best counted for little that drove them to violence.

Being nice is not enough.

Because nice people do terrible things all the time. Nice often hides tremendous evil.

We must remember that it was nice people who shouted angry, terrible slurs at people who just wanted to go to school, or sit at lunch counters, or ride somewhere other than the back of the bus.

We must remember that it was nice people who bombed churches. Nice people gathered to lynch. Nice people took pictures with the deceased.

Nice people are kind enough to look both ways before saying something offensive.

Nice people or their classmates, depending on which explanation you believe, wear blackface and KKK hoods in their yearbook photos a generation after the civil rights movement. They are later elected governor. If only they'd said something sexist. They could have been president.

Nice people begrudgingly gave women the same vote as men but refuse to offer the same wage

Nice people approach male seminarian me with greater deference and respect than they approach my ordained sisters in ministry.

Nice, churchgoing, God-fearing people terrorize transgender people and send gay people to debunked and decried gay conversion therapy to pray the gay away for their own good.

Nice, educated, pious, respectable people commit all manner of horrors.

One dark night, a bunch of nice, respectable people killed Jesus.

So don't tell me he was one of those nice guys. His was a struggle against our pious niceties, a call to true care for neighbor and the ultimate love of God Almighty.

Jesus was not just a nice guy. He was and is our Savior, priest, prophet, and king. And his church is not just about being nice. It is formation in God's love, being anointed priest and prophet, each in our own way, to God's glory.

Nice, we must remember, is not enough. Too often, it is simply evil.

Here in this space, however, true love pushes us past nice. This week, let us rededicate ourselves to love: in prayer, reconciliation, and service.

First, pray. We should trust God more than we trust ourselves and our own perspectives. We should at least put as much faith in God as we do in our own actions and our own politics. If you don't have a daily prayer regimen, get one. A few words at the beginning and close of day can

be enough. You'll soon discover you worship an awesome God who doesn't care all that much for you being nice. God is too busy caring for you, just you.

Second, forgive. Key to the ministry of reconciliation that is given to Christians is forgiveness. There is a retribution, a kind of justice, that we feel we are entitled to when we are wronged, or when someone is wrong on the Internet. Forgiving is forgoing, letting go of that right, that need to avenge ourselves. If you find yourself caught up in the digital outrage machine, stop, pray, do one concrete thing in the service of what you truly believe, and then let it go. Give it up to God who you will find does more than you can ask for or imagine. Whatever you do, don't read the comments. Then, if God so wills, press on in the ministry of reconciliation.

Finally, serve. Your bulletin is full of the ways we serve—not because they're nice things to do, though they are—but because we are called to such loving service. We feed our neighbors because Jesus fed the multitudes. We are called to teach because Jesus taught his disciples. We gather in chili cook-offs and ski trips because Jesus called his disciples friends. We are called to love as Jesus loved us. Look at the ministries available and get involved.

Your service—and your pledge—are urgently needed. The Finance Committee meets this week. It will make recommendations based on pledges received to the Vestry, who will then vote on our final budget for 2019. We had hoped for \$425,000 in pledges. That's what it costs to run this church in all the ways we'd hoped for the next year. Without \$380,000 in pledges, Vestry and clergy will be forced to cut programming and staff hours, if not staff people.

\$380,000 is nice. We are called to more. If you haven't pledged, or you're considering increasing, now is the time to serve this community which formed and forms us in love.

Christians are called to more than pious niceness. We are called to prayer, to forgiveness, and service—in love.

Nice is not enough. It is at best a first step.

The Christian life is not an easy way. Modern American life is so violent, so brutal, so inhuman that simply keeping it together is a daily task, and an act of kindness can appear to us as a kind of revolution.

But being nice is not enough. We are called to something greater than revolution, and if such a thing seems impossible, remember that all things are possible with God. Remember that God has appointed you over nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant. And God will be with you through it all. Because, as Christian preachers will tell you, once upon a time, there was Jesus, who walked among us, for us, and who will return in glory. All true sermons are simply variations on this theme, at which point we—all priest and prophets in our own ways—go forth in the power of the Spirit. And yeah maybe watch a little football.

The world could use some more nice, so, please, do be nice this week. But, if you dare, love.