

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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October 3, 2021

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I've recently resumed watching a television program called "The Good Doctor" Some of you may have heard of it, for those who don't "The Good Doctor" follows a young man named Shaun Murphy. He is autistic with savant syndrome, and he is a resident doctor at a prestigious hospital. Throughout the series we follow Shaun as he learns what it means to be human, and what it means to be a good doctor. The last season starts at the beginning of the pandemic, and as a doctor, Shaun is frontline. With his 'normal' life turned upside down, Shaun is becoming more and more isolated, keeping his distance from the people he loves, specifically his partner Lea, for fears of passing COVID onto her. As an aside, it's curious to watch this a year from when it aired, and to notice how relevant it still is for now.

At one point, frustrated and on the edge of tears he visits the home of the one person who has helped guide him, Aaron Glassman. Shaun shouts out that he doesn't know what to do. He goes on to describe how he's cranky, and how he doesn't like it. He describes how he is so frightened and worried about his partner Lea, and whether or not she has COVID, that he doesn't know if it's better to not talk to her until the pandemic has ended. To which Glassman asks: "Is that what you want?"

And Shaun replies:

"No. No I don't want that at all but I don't want to feel like this either. I want this to be over."

And isn't that it...don't we too want this to be over. And it's not. But that's not the part that caught my attention, what caught my attention; what caused me to pause the program and rewatch this scene a couple of times was Glassman's response. He says:

"Well we all want it to be over Shaun. We're sick of ourselves, we're sick of each other, We're pining for someone we can't be with. We're confused, we're uncomfortable. On top of everything else we're scared that the world will never be the same again. And I don't know Shaun, I don't have a map for this kind of thing. Best I can say is be kind, be kind to yourself, be kind to everyone. Because what else is there."¹

Kind of hit's you between the eyes. What else is there...to be kind, kind to yourself and kind to everyone. Kindness and gentleness. Another fruit of the Spirit which the world sorely needs.

When we first started this worship series, reflecting on the abundance with which God shares the Fruit of the Spirit, I was excited, because I felt that it could be the prophetic message that the Church could make to the world, that the church had the thing that the world needed. Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Gentleness, Thankfulness, Generosity and Self-Control. Little did I imagine how I was going to be challenged by these same fruits week after week. Little did I realize how expressing and practicing those Fruits would be regular lessons and reminders for me. And that's shown me is just HOW important these Fruits of the Spirit are, for us, now, and for the world around us.

When I first chose this passage, I thought I was going to focus on the end of it, when the King of Israel puts on a great feast. The rest, was there mostly for context so we could see just how abundantly kind, and good the King of Israel responds. And, as it often happens when I sit with scripture for a while, something else jumped out at me.

¹ The Good Doctor, Season 4, Episode 2

In our passage today sight plays a significant role. What is seen and not seen are important beats in this story. Over the course of this passage sight is given to EliSHa's servant, taken away from an army, and returned to an army. Eyes are opened, and eyes are closed, and this got me thinking about us today.

I wrote, in my letter this past week about stress, about the stress that's inside me, and also the stress that's in our society in general. I wrote about how when we become stressed we can become very focused, for some this means that can buckle down and work well on tasks, without any distraction. For others this stress can become a distraction, where the only thing that can be focused on is the stress itself, and we can get into cycles, ruminating on this stress. And for others even, the stress, can cause us to become self-centred.

In all of these situations our sight, our attention, shifts from being able to consider others outside of ourselves, and instead, shifts inward. It shifts just to ourselves, and often to protecting ourselves. When we're in a prolonged stress like this pandemic, at some point we begin to 'circle the wagons' and protect ourselves. Sometimes that's manifested in poor, or strained interactions, like the conversation that's cold, terse or blunt. And sometimes is expressed more physically, sometimes even violently. We're witnessing people lashing out in a variety of ways. And it's those things we're hearing about in the news.

We're stressed because we feel helpless. We're stressed because there's little that we can do to change how people behave around us. And I could write a huge list of what we'd love people to do to just make this pandemic end, but then I'd cycle into despair myself. For some in their frustration, in their helplessness, they lash out to feel that they have power and control over something. All in all, we're blinded. We can't see. And it's when we can't see that it becomes more difficult to express kindness or gentleness, and for that matter, grace and mercy seem very distant.

Connecting this to the scripture today, as I pondered this, I realized just how much like EliSHa's servant we are.

Like EliSHa's servant, we wake up one day, we look out one morning, or we finally let our guard down one day, and we see ourselves surrounded by threats, in our case it's not an army, or chariots, or horses, but something else, and I'll leave it for you to name the threats, it could be ridiculous protests, it could be the person in the store that after 2 years is still not wearing their mask, or if they are it's protecting their chin and not their nose or mouth, again, it could be the looming threat of another possible lockdown, or it could be...again I could get derailed creating this list. And we say, like EliSHa's servant, "alas master, what shall we do?"

OK, we don't say that, and I'm pretty sure EliSHa's servant didn't say that either. It's what's written down, but it sounds a little too polite. But we exclaim nonetheless. Or maybe we just let out one big sigh, that expresses our exasperation or helplessness.

And into this, EliSHa enters the story. EliSHa didn't chastise, he didn't belittle his servant, he didn't demean him. Instead, he reassured him, "Don't be afraid." We're not alone, there are more with us, than there are with them. And EliSHa prayed. He prayed that the eyes of his servant would be opened to see and to notice the truth of what he was saying. The he was not alone, that there were more with them than there were against.

What we need now, what each of us needs, what our world, and our society what we all need, right now, is an EliSHa. We need someone to reassure us, to remind us that we're not alone and we need someone pray for us so that our eyes may be opened so we can see. We need

someone to be gentle and kind with us in the same way that EliSHa was with his servant. We need an EliSHa.

And, I don't want to just focus on receiving kindness and gentleness this morning, I also want to touch on sharing kindness and gentleness, because it's both. We need to be kind and gentle with ourselves, and with others too. And so, as much as we need an EliSHa, we also need to be like EliSHa.

While it might be cathartic for us to call for those threats that surround us to be blinded and led away, to be jailed, punished or fined in some way. That's not what I exactly have in mind when I say we need to be like EliSHa. Rather, it's the end of the story that inspires me.

After bringing the army of Aram to Samaria, and after the King of Isreal see's this, EliSHa act's mercifully to the Kings inquiry, "Shall I massacre them?" When faced with the option for a quick demise of his foes, EliSHa exclaims, NO. He calls the King to attention saying to him, Did you capture them? Did you bring them here? No you didn't and you have no right to exact vengeance. Instead, give them food and water, and let them go back to their master.

Except, the King didn't do that either. The King did more! In an astonishing reversal, instead of slaughtering this captured army, the King puts on a great feast!

Maybe this is where the adage kill them with kindness comes from, I don't know. But the King goes beyond what's reasonable as far as how to treat captured enemy combatants. And this is more along the lines of what I meant that we need to be like EliSHa.

In the face of threats, in the face of struggle, can we be bold enough to defiantly say 'NO!' we do not want harm done, we don't want people to be severely punished. And instead can we offer life, can we offer kindness and gentleness, can we offer food and water? In Psalm 23 we have the verse that says, you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. What might it look like for us to offer an overflowing cup of gentleness along with a table prepared with kindness?

Curiously, as I was preparing this I noticed an interview with Jaskirat Sidhu, the driver of the truck which collided with the Humbolt Bronco's Bus in that horrific collision 2018. Currently he is in prison serving his time while also appealing the case against him for deportation. The kindness in this story, however, is that three Humboldt families, including the parents of Evan Thomas, who died in the crash are advocating on his behalf to not be deported. Scott and Laurie Thomas have not only forgiven Sidhu, they are actively working to keep him in Canada. "We sent some letters to his lawyer saying our family doesn't think that he needs to be deported. That doesn't need to be the necessary conclusion to how this all ends."² Can we offer life, can we offer kindness and gentleness?

I think, again, it requires that our eyes be opened. It requires that we see beyond our own struggle and pain, to see the struggles and pain of others. And this is no easy task. It takes effort, perhaps this is why it requires more than our own will, it requires prayer and the Spirits help, to see and notice the fear, and the confusion, the anger, the frustration, the longing, the discomfort, the pain, the sorrow, the grief of others around us. As I've been reminded, we don't know what's happening in others lives when we first meet them. They could be having the best day of their life, or they could be having the worst. They could be ready to explode in celebration, or they are on the verge of a breakdown, we don't know. And so how might we demonstrate, embody the kindness and gentleness that EliSHa shows to this invading army?

² <https://www.ctvnews.ca/w5/jaskirat-sidhu-the-humboldt-driver-speaks-out-1.5607925>

To bring this from out there thinking to right here thinking. In a few hours we're going to have a congregational meeting. How will we embody these Fruits of the Spirit as we go about doing the business of the church? How will we exercise patience, when hearing views that we may disagree with, how might we exercise kindness and gentleness as we speak our perspectives and opinions, how will we live out generosity, and self-control as we make choices together? How will God's love, joy and peace, be in us and the actions and choices we make together? I don't have answers, I just have these questions or perhaps they're challenges for you?

As we go out into our week, as we try to live, or perhaps as we are challenged by these fruits of the Spirit, I want you to go out with your eyes opened, knowing that you are not alone. That you have been and are held in prayers. That God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit go with you, even when you might struggle to see it, you are not alone.

Amen.