

Sixty-one Days of Kindness...Devotions for a Season of Change 2024

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I recently heard some statistics that indicated that the number one longing of the people surveyed was for a return to kindness. It seems that unkindness, whether personal or in public life, is a key indicator for depression in young people. I expect that is true for all people. The scriptures list kindness as a fruit of the Spirit and as an attribute of disciples. Loving Kindness is often given as a defining attribute of God. As those created in God's image and called upon to mirror that image in all that we do, perhaps this moment calls us into a season of exploring and nurturing kindness. The kindness to which we are called is not so simple as just not being mean when we could do so or it would seem justified. Spirit empowered kindness is deeper than that. It is transformational, takes place in the soul and then expands to others. The little congregation that I mentor decided this year to take on the challenge of kindness and share it with the community. In addition to daily meditations of kindness, they have gone public. They set up kindness tables at the farmer's market and in the town center where they invite people to stop and share an experience of kindness. The people have the opportunity to fill in a gratitude for kindness card with their story of kindness. These cards can be anonymous if desired. With permission our leaders take the cards and add the stories of kindness to our website and to their daily prayers. It is proving empowering and has initiated new friendships and positive feelings in the whole community. Scientists tell us that it takes, on average, sixty days for a new habit to become automatic, so these sixty days, hopefully, will just be a start of a new lifelong habit of kindness!

Enjoy! Eugenia

Day 1 – God's Kind Gift of Life – Genesis 1:20;24;26 *And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let the birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky."...And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind."...Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."*

The ancestors of our faith considered God's greatest kindness to be the gift of life itself. Each breath is a continuing act of God's kindness. The word often translated as kindness, or loving kindness, in the Old Testament, is *chesed*. It means to commit to someone or to display devotion without conditions. It is sometimes translated as loyalty, mercy or steadfast love. When we think about the gift of life itself as an act of God's steadfast loving kindness, that can change the lens through which we view our ordinary lives and what it means for us to steward (have dominion) over the whole created order with all its wild and

wooly life forms. Today pause and consider the gift of this moment. Notice the gift of this breath and the next. Notice the wild diversity of life all around you, the birds at the feeder, sound of water running in the bathroom as a family member brushes their teeth, the gentle steady thump of your heartbeat. Each of those simple things is an expression of God's loving kindness for you specifically and for the cosmos in general. Today's act of kindness is to stop for a moment throughout the day and notice all of the life around you and within you. Tilt your head slightly to the sun and thank God for God's loving kindness that never ends.

Prayer: Gracious God of all of Life, thank you for your never failing kindness to all whom you have created. Awaken me today to the bounty of your kindness and fill me with greater gratitude. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 2 – God's Kind Gift of Companionship – Genesis 2:23a – *Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh;"*

In the second creation story in Genesis, chapter 2, God spoke the entire dazzle of creation into being in one wild loving frenzy. Finally, God created a human being and put that one in a garden of delight (Eden.) It did not take long for God to see that the earth creature (Adam) was lonely. All of the bounty of creation, and even God's own loving intimate presence, was not enough to ease the loneliness. God saw that it was not good for the human being to be alone and so created a companion that shared the earth creature's own nature and being. So overcome with gratitude for a corresponding companion, the earth creature, now call man, says the first words spoken by a human in the bible. "This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." There is nothing quite like the wonder of sharing life with companions that are worthy of our friendship and devotion. The action of creating the woman in this story is one of ultimate kindness. God had originally intended to be companion enough, but the loneliness of the earth creature touched God so deeply that God created a companion to ease the human's loneliness. How unspeakably kind! Today's act of kindness is to think about the companions in your life and the joy, laughter and comfort each brings. Even if they are far away, or no longer a daily part of your life, take a moment today to send a note of appreciation to each thanking them for the ways they have made your life full and accompanied you through thick and thin.

Prayer: Gracious God of all of Life, I thank you today for the kindness you have shown me in bringing companions into my life to help me, stretch me, and fill my life with joy. I lift before you today especially..... My heart is full of gratitude for your kindness. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 3 – God's Loving Kindness – Micah 6:8 & Hosea 6:6 – *He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God...For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*

Today we look again at the notion of God's loving kindness in the Hebrew Scriptures (*chesed*.) The word *chesed* conveys God's unconditional devotion toward us. That is the word translated in today's verses as 'love kindness' and 'steadfast love.' I like to translate the word as 'unshakeoffableness.' I always imagine my dog Bonnie when I think of *chesed*. When she first came to us, before we put up a fence, she loved to run to the ditch in front of our yard and explore. Since we live so close to the coast, the ditch is often full of a combination of rain and salt water and home to all manner of crabs and frogs. After she splashed in the sandy brackish water, she would run up on the front porch and try to shake all the water and sand off from nose to tail. But no matter how many times she shook she was still wet and sandy when she came back into the house. What the scripture tells us is that God's love and kindness cling to us like that. We can shake. We can run. But we cannot outrun that loving kindness. Today, if it is sunny and you can go outside, stop and notice your shadow. Then see if you can outrun it? Try again. God's loving kindness is like that. I hope as you try this silly exercise you will find yourself smiling or laughing at the foolish ways you sometimes try to outrun God's love and kindness. Take a moment to thank God for outsmarting you every time. Today's kindness practice: Think of ways that you can mirror that kind of dogged devotion to others today. Do one thing that you might not ordinarily take time to do knowing that you are passing on God's kindness to others.

Prayer: Great God of Loving Kindness, I thank you today that you always out run me, that you refuse to ever desert me. Help me today to turn and embrace you if I feel the urge to flee from your presence or your ways. Thank you for the kindness of your devotion to me. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 4 – God's Kind Deliverance – Exodus 14:21-22 – *Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.*

There are so many stories of God's deliverance in scripture that it is hard to choose one upon which to focus. In the Old Testament perhaps none is more dramatic than God's delivering of the enslaved Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt. This experience we call The Exodus, which the book of Exodus details. One of the things I love about the Exodus story and references to it, is that the words used to talk about Egypt come to mean both Egypt the place of bondage, and Egypt as the condition of bondage. As we will see in tomorrow's introduction to the Ten Commandments, of all of the many words God could use to self-identify, God says, I am the one who brings you out of bondage. For Christians, we see the ultimate act of freeing from bondage in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God delivers because it is who God is. God frees because it is who God is. Perhaps our bondage is not as obvious as slavery and making bricks without straw, but it can feel just as powerful and we can feel just as powerless. So today see if you can identify any bondage in

your life. Perhaps you are helpless at work. Perhaps you think others understand lessons in school better than you do. Perhaps your family situation is dire and you can't fix it. Perhaps your health is keeping you in bondage. Or your habits. Whatever it is, take a moment to bring that situation into the light of God in prayer knowing that deliverance is who God is. Thank God not only for deliverance in the past but for all that lies ahead of you as well. Deliverance is God's kindness in action. Are there ways today that you can kindly support others in their journey of deliverance?

Prayer: O God my Deliverer, I thank you today for the many ways you have moved me through and out of my troubles all my life. I thank you that your loving kindness insists on my freedom and release. Help me today to live in the light of your freedom, grateful for your kindness. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 5 – God's Kind Gift of Boundaries – Exodus 20:1-20 – *Please read these verses in your own Bible.*

Sometimes freedom is not all it is cracked up to be. Especially if we have accustomed ourselves to bondage and it feels normal. After the people of Israel were freed from their bondage in Egypt, they spent forty years trying to find their way to true freedom in the promised land. There were many fits and starts on that journey. There were many times that they were confused and just wanted to go backwards. Moses was at his wits end with the people when he climbed the holy mountain to ask God for some concrete and specific help. The help God offered was an amazing love letter in which God outlined God's deepest values and gave a picture of the pitfalls that can derail life and keep fulfillment, and even faithfulness, at bay. This letter/picture we call the Ten Commandments. One of the blessings of that letter written on tablets of stone, is that it offers us the gift of boundaries within which we can live, find meaning and show our love for God and neighbor. These boundaries are not so much fences as they are borders that separate joy from despair, the kingdom of God from the wasteland of selfishness. What a kindness to be given a picture of what spiritual life and community life can look like and what we can do to destroy it all! Take a moment today as you read the passage to see if you are drawn to any one particular boundary. You may be drawn to it because it feels too marvelous, for example to lay down your other gods/rulers, or it may be because you struggle to incorporate the particular command into your life. Sit with this command for a moment. Let its kindness unfold deeply inside you. Ask God how you can deepen in these ways. Ask for help. Throughout the day, look for ways that you can love God and respect others. Take one or two actions that are concrete and specific and thank God for the kindness of good boundaries.

Prayer: Gracious Deliverer, I thank you for showing me the path to joy. Help me to follow in your ways with a grateful heart. Where I stumble, please pick me up and forgive me. Thank you for the kindness of giving me a path forward. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 6 – God’s Kind Gift of Rest – Exodus 20:8 – *Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.*

Today we return to the Ten Commandments and focus on the fourth. The first three concern our personal relationship with God (God is our one, our only, and we are not to trivialize that relationship.) With the fourth, God combines the personal and the communal for the first time with the command to keep Sabbath holy. This is a VAST commandment and cannot be addressed in fullness in these few lines. For today, I invite you to focus on the invitation to rest in this commandment. Many of us may be pretty good at Sabbath worship but are almost strangers to rest. We are constantly working on something. Or if not working, then we are fretting or planning or numbing out. None of that is rest. One of the beauties of the Old Testament stories is that time itself is organized by rest. The week begins with Sabbath rest. All of the days are oriented toward it. It is one day after Sabbath or three days until Sabbath. The days begin at Sunset not sunrise, reminding us that it is the gift of stopping and resting that begins any other activity. A priority on rest is baked into creation itself and is necessary for any of the work we do, (especially the works of kindness and justice that follow this command.) Today think a bit about how you actually rest, not how you entertain yourself when not working. What does real rest feel like? Do you know? What supports rest for you? Can you say no to important things to make rest a priority? If this is a struggle, ask God for help to discern what is really restful and to create space for you to rest. Thank God for the great kindness of making rest a priority.

Prayer: God of Sabbath rest, help me today to find moments of rest. Help me to offer moments of rest to others and in so doing to spread the kindness of sabbath everywhere I go. In Jesus’ holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 7 – Jesus’ Kind Welcome – Luke 9:46-48 *An argument arose among them concerning which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side and said to them, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me, for the least among all of you is the greatest.”*

This radical passage tells us more than meets the eye at first. Yes, Jesus often displayed kindness to children. I remember growing up coloring pictures of a smiling Jesus surrounded by and hugging smiling children. I love those pictures. I love the display of loving kindness in those pictures. Here, however, Jesus is going beyond that kind of kindness. In a way, the child is an object lesson Jesus uses to make his point about welcome, about who is in and who is out, who is worthy and who is not. In the ancient world children, while obviously loved, had few rights. They were powerless. They could not own property. They had no wealth of their own. They were dependent of the kindness and generosity of

families and the community. In this passage the disciples are jockeying for power and prestige. They want to be at the top of the totem pole with all of its privileges. Jesus has a different totem pole. For him the way to greatness was the way of welcome, especially of the poor, the powerless and those who can make no real contribution. The startling thing about this passage is that Jesus sees greatness as kind welcome extended to those who are the least, not those who have and want the most. This theme occurs again and again in the New Testament. How do we show that kind of welcome in our churches and lives? Do we get as excited when a homeless person, or a poor widow comes to our church as we do when the mayor or an award winner arrives? Is our welcome equally filled with kindness? The word most often translated as kindness in the New Testament refers not just to being sweet and not hurting people's feelings when we think they have it coming. It is more substantial than that. It means to be gracious, to find goodness easy, to display integrity, to be drawn to excellence in personal behavior, and to be quick to support excellence in others. At its heart New Testament kindness is compassionate and useful. To live out of kindness is to be benevolently serviceable. Take a moment today to consider whether you welcome others with this kind of kindness. If not, why do you find this hard? Decide today on one act of welcoming kindness that you can show to someone who can give you nothing in return. If you are sure that you will not be using that person for gain in any way, including emotional gain, take a small action of kind welcome toward them.

Prayer: Great God of Welcome, help me to kindly welcome those who can do nothing for me today, just because it is how you always welcome me. In Jesus' Holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 8 - The Kindness of Purpose - Mark 1:16-17 - *As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people."*

Years ago, I read the book *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor. In his book he writes of his experiences in the German concentration camps in which, over time, all of his family members were killed or died of disease. In a poignant section he talks about the despair of the camps and how base daily concerns were. At one point he realized that the only way to survive each day was to be himself, an observer of the human mind and condition. He set out to try to discern why some people died quickly upon arrival and others, against all odds, found a way to survive. His conclusion was that those that survived believed that there was something meaningful yet for them to do. I cannot help but think of that story as I read the stories of Jesus calling his first disciples. They lived in difficult times and circumstances and yet when this unknown rabbi Jesus approached them, they realized the transforming power of having something meaningful to do. No matter our own circumstances, we each have that same call and opportunity. There is something meaningful for us to do with each and every day of our lives. It may not be a big thing, but it is a crucial thing. The call to live our own lives and to embody our faith daily is purpose enough. What a kindness it is to be given a reason for living, a purpose that we can in our small ways fulfill. It is indeed what makes the difference between despair and bountiful life. Today think for a few moments about your purpose. Is there something meaningful for you to do today? It doesn't have to be big. It just needs to be

full of loving kindness. Make a commitment today to look for opportunities to express your purpose and see what God brings to your mind.

Prayer: God of the Big Picture, help us to see our purpose in your plan. We thank you for the kindness of having a role to play in the way you show your loving kindness to the world. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 9 – The Kindness of Calling from our Hiding Places – Luke 19:1-10 *When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”*

We saw yesterday that one of God's gifts of kindness is a purpose for our lives. Sometimes we fail to grab on to that purpose because we are afraid of failure or rejection. We, like Zacchaeus, may be curious about what Jesus is up to and whether he could make a meaningful change in our lives, but we are conditioned by both years of rejection and the shame we carry for flawed choices we have made, and so we would rather climb a tree and hide from the consequences of our choices or from the change healing often demands. Zacchaeus was a tax collector. In Jesus' day tax collectors were considered Roman collaborators who often gained wealth by politically sanctioned extortion. On top of that he was a small man, which in the beautiful symbolic language of scripture describes both his stature and the confines of his heart. Like many of us, maybe he hoped for the benefit Jesus offered without having to change his habits or priorities. He didn't get away with that and neither can we. Jesus spotted him, as he was, hiding in a tree, and told him in no uncertain terms that he, Jesus, would be heading home with Zacchaeus that very night. We cannot hide from intimacy with Christ, at least not for long. The kindness of Jesus here is startling. Nothing Zacchaeus was or had done was a barrier to Jesus' desire to share life with him, to heal him and restore him to the fullness of life. Jesus still calls each of us from our hiding places. They are of no importance to him, and are no impediment. Jesus sees straight through the metaphorical leaves that we weave into garments to hide behind. He sees who we are and who we can yet become if we come out from our hiding. Today think for a moment about the habits, practices, or sin that you cling to and the ways that you try to hide from light and love. Is there anything in particular that you fear being known? Jesus already knows and you need have no fear. He wants to sit down at table with you and talk it over. Today, if possible, step outside your home for a moment. Then turn to reenter asking Jesus to be your honored guest. Thank him for the kindness of seeing the real you.

Prayer: Great God of X-ray Vision, I thank you for seeking me out when I try to hide from you. Thank you for cutting through my fear, habit and sin and seeing straight into my longing heart. In gratitude for this kindness, I invite you more deeply into the home of my heart. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 10 – The Kindness of Walking with us in Grief – Luke 24:17 *And he (Jesus) said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?”*

Today's verse comes from a long and lush passage in Luke that follows the upheaval of Jesus' crucifixion and reported resurrection. Two disciples who had come to Jerusalem

from Emmaus to celebrate Passover are walking home after the painful and confusing events of the weekend. They are bereft. Their hearts are broken. They thought that Jesus would be the one to change everything and yet Rome executed him and they feel like all hope is lost. Add to that that some of their friends have reported that his tomb is empty and they have seen him in the flesh, and they do not know what to think. All they know is that they are hurting. Their friend and rabbi was executed. Other friends seem to have lost their minds. Now the hopes they had clung to so dearly seem completely lost and all they can do is put one foot in front of the other and try to talk it through together. In that moment when grief and confusion have overwhelmed them, Jesus sidles up next to them on the journey and asks them what they are talking about. There are wonderful revelations in this passage that we could spend a month pondering, like why they don't recognize him, how he explains scripture to them, and how they finally do recognize him in the breaking of the bread. But for today, I invite you to think about the tender kindness of Jesus coming to them in their grief and confusion and walking along with them. Most of us have known times of grief and confusion when we did not know what to do or how to get by from moment to moment. Like with the disciples on that long ago road to Emmaus, Jesus still comes close to us and gently helps us process and come to greater understanding. He walks it all out with us. Maybe, like with the ancestors, we don't know it is him until we look back and see how we have changed, but still. He comes. He accompanies. He enlightens and he lightens the load of grief and confusion. Today take a moment to remember a time when you were hurting badly. Could you experience Jesus with you in that time? Was it only later that you saw how sustained and guided you were? Did Jesus use a person to help you and stay by your side? One of the greatest ways that we can mirror God's kindness is by sticking with and listening to those in grief or confusion. Is there someone you can accompany in that way today?

Prayer: God of Consolation and Light, I thank you for walking with me in hard times, when I recognized you and when I did not. Help me today to notice those you want to accompany through me. Give me insight, patience and desire to walk the road with those in pain. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 11 – The Kindness of an Open Mind – Matthew 15:28 – *Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment.*

Some people find today's story unsettling. Jesus has gone to the district of Tyre and Sidon when a local Canaanite woman came up to him to ask for help for her sick daughter. For much of biblical history, the Canaanites were considered an idolatrous and sinful people. They were understood to be cursed due to ancestral sin and faithful Israelites would have nothing to do with them. In this story, the woman comes to Jesus for help and both he and his disciples try to get rid of her. They are harsh and dismissive. But she is strong and her love for her daughter, together with her quick wits, refuse to leave or let them off the hook. This and its parallel stories are the only instances in the Gospels in which Jesus is bested in a debate and changes his mind as a result. Hence the discomfort of many with this story. I, however, love it. I don't love it just because it is a beautiful picture of an outcast woman fighting for her daughter's life. I don't love it just because she is smart and brave. I don't even just love it because Jesus extols her faith in such strong terms that only an exclamation

point in the text can indicate the passion of it. No, not just those reasons. I love this passage because it shows the incredible power and kindness of having an open mind, even if it has to be opened for us by those who are marginalized or whom we do not like or want to be around. Such is the greatness of the humanity of Jesus that he demonstrates for us how faith is not contained in our systems or creeds but comes in many ways in many peoples. When we open our hearts and minds we, like Jesus, may sometimes be surprised at the depth of faith in those we would dismiss. Can you think of people or groups that you secretly disdain, think are not worth bothering with, are just not a priority for you? Have you ever had the experience of having your mind opened by new insights or experiences? How has the kindness of an open mind changed you and your relationships? Have you ever seen powerful faith demonstrated by those you think of as sinful or not faithful? Take a moment to close your eyes and open your heart to receive the gifts these people offer to you. Ask yourself how you can show the kindness of an open mind today. Decide on one action or context and give it a try.

Prayer: O Great God Whose Arms Are Wider Than We Know, thank you for the gift of an open mind. When my mind is closed to others and to love, I ask you to help me model the kindness of Jesus and change my mind. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 12 – The Kindness of Healing our Isolation – Luke 17:12-14 – *As he entered a village, ten men with a skin disease approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went they were made clean.*

In Jesus' day skin diseases were both painful and feared. Sufferers were considered cursed by God and forced to leave their homes and communities to live on the outskirts of town dependent on charity to survive. When skin diseases erupted people went to the priests for a judgment. If they were declared unclean, not only were they banished from towns and villages, they were banned from worship and the means of grace of the sacrificial system. In essence they were condemned to a life of shame and isolation. In this healing story, not only does Jesus relieve their physical torment, he restores them to the community of faith. They can worship again. They are no longer isolated. During the height of the pandemic, many of us experienced fear and isolation as we never had before. I cannot help but think of dying patients with nurses in hazmat suits standing next to their beds holding cell phones while family members said their goodbyes from afar. What a toll that isolation took! In today's verses we see that Jesus' first priority in extending mercy was to restore people to community, especially the community of faith. The pandemic taught us that community is essential and that it can happen in many ways, in zoom squares, in safe spaces, in on line book groups, in YouTube worship. However, community happens, even if not in person for the common good, it is essential to life and healing. Jesus' act of healing mercy is restoration to community. Are there those in your life who still experience isolation since the pandemic? Are there those who experienced isolation long before that and now long after? What does isolation look like in our day? Who do we push to the margins of community so we don't have to see them and deal with their needs? Who do we push to the margins because we are afraid of them? Can you think of a way today that you could reach out to

ease the isolation of someone in specific? Do it! That is God's loving kindness working through you to heal in ways you may never see.

Prayer: God of Grace, I thank you for your mercy (loving kindness) in healing my isolation and drawing me into deeply awakened community. If I can be your vehicle for kindness today, help me to become aware of that calling and to step out to answer. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 13 – The Kindness of Lament – Matthew 23:37- *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate.”*

Jesus is approaching Jerusalem for the last time. Whether he knows that for sure or not, he surely senses the danger. The people are divided. Some seem to have heard his message but their faith has not had time to deepen. Many have found him to be a dangerous heretic and in rejecting him have rejected the transformation God intended in sending him. Now as he prepares to enter the city he looks upon it and is overwhelmed with grief and sadness that the people have chosen their own way rather than the reforms he offered. And so he cries out in lament likening himself to a mother hen who wants to protect her brood from all danger. He sees the cities desolation, and no doubt where their choices will lead. Before he goes on to fulfill his role in the drama, he pauses to cry out in lament. Lament is a passionate expression of grief and sorrow. There is steadfast loving kindness at the heart of this kind of lament. When we see clearly the consequences of behaviors we are helpless to change, it naturally leads to lament. Perhaps it is the very love and helplessness of lament that makes it so powerful. It strips away the illusion of control. It strips away the illusion of separateness. As in Jesus' powerful metaphor, the hen and the chicks are one. They face what is coming together, the wiser doing what she can to protect the most vulnerable. In our grief process, lament can have a powerful cathartic effect. I remember going to tell a mom that her teenage son had been killed from an overdose. As I held her, she cried out with the most powerful wail I have ever heard. It was an eternal sound. An ethereal sound. There was a sense in that moment that a solidarity with God was somehow established. Hen and chick were one, wailing together. The kindness of lament lies in the solidarity of it. When we lament, we share the life of Christ and some mysterious how, there is kindness in it. Is there anything in your life that you have refused to lament? If so, maybe today is the day to do that wailing. As you do, know that Jesus weeps with you. If the truth of your lament is too deep or scary to face alone, ask a friend or pastor to be with you, not to buffer or fix, but to witness and protect. The witnessing of lament is powerful kindness too.

Prayer: God of Every Moment, I thank you that you both witness and lament the messes your children make of our lives. Help me today to feel your embrace as I release any sorrow and powerlessness to you. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 14 – The Kindness of Holy Presence – Exodus 19:16-18 – *On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought*

the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now all of Mt. Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently.

In their decades long wilderness journey, the people have reach the holy mountain of Sinai. They have recommitted themselves to God and that recommitment has led to new and deeper encounter with the divine presence that will, after just a few verses more, culminate with the gift of the Law in the Ten Commandments. Encounters with God always defy language. Often in the Hebrew scriptures symbols of smoke and fire are how the writers speak of being in the presence of God. Earlier in the book of Exodus we are told that a pillar of fire leads the people by night and a pillar of cloud leads them during the day. Sometimes we too struggle to describe the experience of God's holy presence in our own lives. We may talk about a shimmering light, or the feeling of an embrace, or the goose-bumpy feeling that sometimes overtakes us in worship. We may talk about the power and majesty of nature and the feeling of connection with all things that comes as we stand in awe at creations beauty and intricacy. Whenever we experience a sense of God's presence that takes us, even for a moment, out of the mundane reality of our ordinary lives into something we cannot define and know we cannot control, we are on holy ground. This sense of presence with us is a transformative experience of God's loving kindness. Without those moments, no matter how fleeting, it would be hard for us to rise above our circumstances and daily concerns. When lightning flashes, or fog envelops, we are caught up into a presence without which life can feel unendurable and meaning hard to find. Today, take a moment to stop what you are doing and breathe in the kind presence of God. Perhaps light a candle and feel its warmth, or step outside and look up at the vast sky, knowing that you are surrounded with God's kind presence at every moment and that God wants nothing more than to share life and beauty with you.

Prayer: Gracious God, I thank you today for your holy presence with me, within me and all around me. Awaken me to this kindness today so that I may help others see you too. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 15 – The Kindness of Creative Energy – Genesis 1:1 *When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.”*

Whether you read the creation stories in Genesis and understand a day to be a twenty-four-hour period or indeterminate millennia, the truth is the same. God's creative energy set all things in motion and continues to bring all that is into being. It is touching in this first verse of the Bible that the impetus for creation was the reigning in of chaos and the need for enlightenment. In this beautiful verse the Spirit of God (wind) is hovering over the darkness looking for a way to deploy God's own creative energy to bring order and insight. It is my belief that God's creative energy was not confined to the distant past. Spirit continues to hover over the darkness and chaos of our lives offering divine energy and insight to roll back the darkness and to bring order and beauty out of chaos. Are there aspects of your life, personal or communal, that feel chaotic? Do you feel the need of insight and order in

specific ways? Are you open to the surprising sorting power of divine energy and presence? If so, today may be a creation day for you. We learn from the text that creation, even of new being or understanding, takes time. It is rarely instant but it is always good. Take a moment now to open to the kindness of God's creative energy available to you just as it was in the beginning of the beginning. Ask God to give you light so that you can participate in the sorting and ordering of all that is chaotic in your life and world. As you ask for this help, listen within for God's whisper, "This is good." God's steadfast loving kindness is enough for you even if you are tired or feel depleted.

Prayer: Creator God, create in me a new heart filled with love and insight. Sort by your divine energy, the chaos and darkness that feel overwhelming to me so that I can live in peace and share your kindness with others. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 16 – The Kindness of a Holy Advocate – John 14:16 *“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.”*

At this point in John's gospel, Jesus and his closest friends are gathered for their last sacred meal together. Jesus seems to know this but the disciples are still, for the most part, clueless. Jesus has just shocked them senseless by taking on the role of a slave and washing their feet. He has told them, in their shock and vulnerability, that one of them will betray him, and given them to new commandment to love one another. Now he tries to prepare them for what he knows is coming. They are to be parted from each other. In giving this hard news he tells them that when that happens, he will ask the Father to give them another Advocate. The word Advocate, which Jesus associated with the Spirit of Truth, is a word from the field of law. It is something like a defense attorney. The Advocate will stand, speak for, and plead the case of those to whom the Advocate is assigned. It must have been comforting indeed to those disciples as they sat in shock and helplessly watched all that they had longed for crumble around their feet. Sometimes we too feel the need for an Advocate to sort out the details of life and make our defense. The little word 'another' gives us a wonderful clue about this Advocate. It indicates that the one who comes to our aid after Jesus departs will continue the work that Jesus has been doing as well. Are there areas of your life where you feel the need for a powerful Advocate who can plead your case persuasively? Are there areas of your life where you need an Advocate to stand with you and tell the truth to you, or to others? If so, invite the Advocate who is the Spirit of Truth, to come along side you today. Perhaps the ones who need the truth of this Advocate are not outside you. Maybe you also need to listen to the Spirit of Truth making its case within you. In either circumstance, know that in God's loving kindness you have the Advocate you need. Are there ways you might advocate for the truth on behalf of others today? That is a powerful mirroring of God's loving kindness!

Prayer: God of Spirit and Truth, I thank you that I am not left alone to defend myself or convince the world. I thank you that you are with me at all times advocating for that which is good and true. Help me today to reflect your kindness and your truth. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.



Day 17 – The Kindness of a Memory Aid – John 14:25 – *“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.”*

Still in the upper room with his friends, Jesus has washed their feet, predicted their betrayal, given them the commandment to love one another and promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit. In this verse he offers them additional insight into what the Holy Spirit of Truth will do for them. He tells them that the Spirit will help them remember all that he has taught them. In Greek this is a very strong statement. It might be translated that the Spirit will *cause* them to remember. He is not saying that the Spirit will necessarily help you to remember where you left your keys or the date of that dentist appointment that you have been putting off. He says that the Spirit will cause us to remember what he, Jesus, himself has said and taught. What a kindness! Have you ever had a moment when a bible verse or concept has come to your mind just when you needed it? Even if you do not know the scriptures well, have you ever felt nudged in a particular direction to do something that you know is right but don't quite know how? Have you ever found a snippet from an old hymn or saying coming to your mind and, as you pause to consider it, find that it offers you an insight or assurance that you need? If so that is the kindness of the Spirit helping you to remember just what you need to at any given moment. Ask God today to help you become more aware of this Holy Spirit kindness today and see if you notice it more.

Prayer: Great God, I thank you today for the promise of your Spirit and especially for the kindness of helping me to remember your teaching and your ways in Christ Jesus. Help me to stay awake to your work in me and in your world. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 18 – The Kindness of Truth – John 14:6a – *Jesus said to him, I am the way, the truth and the life.”*

Backing up a few verses in John chapter 14, we find this extraordinarily rich statement made by Jesus as he approaches what he senses will be the end of his life on earth. The word 'way' refers to a pathway that encompasses an entire way of life. The early Christians, before the word Christian came into common usage, called themselves People of the Way. They realized that to be Jesus' disciple meant entering into a way of life that mirrored Jesus' own way. The word 'truth' used here, *alethia*, refers not simply to truth as opposed to lies. It is not just facts as opposed to falsity. This word refers to deep and winsome moral truth, ultimate truth, the truth that is at the very heart of all reality. We live in a time that some call 'post truth culture.' One of the things that has eroded our trust and obscured our path these days is that we can't always tell truth from fiction, moral reality from cultural propaganda. The inability to find 'the way' because 'the truth' has been obscured by repeated fantasy. That is devastating to individuals and to communities. Perhaps even two millennia ago, Jesus understood how hard life could be when *alethia* was made merely relative. The great kindness of today's declaration is that even when we live in a world that is torn apart by contrasting visions or declarations of the truth, we have the REAL truth as our guide. What is that REAL truth? It is Jesus himself, his life, actions and teachings. If you become confused sometimes about what is true, take a moment to return to the life of Jesus. What you see in him is what is really true, not just about him, but about all of us as we live

in him. How kind of him on the eve of his betrayal to remind us again that if we want to know what is true we are to look at him, not what people say of him, but him! That is how we find our way.

Prayer: God of Truth, we thank you for the great kindness of sending us Jesus to show us what real truth looks like and does. Help us today to cut through the noise of the competing narratives of our time and find the peace of your truth. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 19 – The Kindness of Oneness – John 17:20-21 – *“I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”*

After his teaching time in the upper room, Jesus moves into prayer. In this prayer, he pours out his heart and longings for all of us. In this section the text fairly bursts with passion. What is Jesus' deepest passion? It is that we may all be one. That of course refers to our intimacy with God in Christ, but it also refers to our intimacy with one another. The answer to Jesus prayer does not mean that we should all agree on all points. It does not mean that there should be no differences among us or that our worship practices must all be the same. Oneness is not about uniformity. Rather, Oneness is the recognition of our common humanity with all of its glory and brokenness. It is the recognition that we are all children of the same parent and as bound together as Jesus is with the Father. We cannot be separated, even if we in our shortsightedness' sometimes think that our differences are existential and not circumstantial. What Jesus longs for us is a oneness that recognizes that what happens to one of God's children happens to all of God's children. He longs for a oneness so deep that the category of enemy disappears entirely. He longs for a oneness among us so profound that we cannot be extricated from each other any more than Jesus could be pulled apart from the Father. It is this compassionate inescapable oneness that remains the calling of all who bear Christ's name in all ages. The practice of the Christian faith is not, and cannot be, a merely private matter. We are part of one body and that is for our own good in so many ways. The kindness of oneness ushers us into the power and challenge of intimacy itself. When we are one, we stick with one another even when we would rather run. Even if our differences are so profound that we choose different paths for our own personal or moral survival, we remain one and tied to those near and far. Today take a moment to sit quietly. Let the vision come into your mind of all of the people that you know or have known, those you love and those you do not. Allow that parade of people to pass before your closed eyes and hear God say, "You are one." Notice if any emotions arise in you. It may feel wonderful when you see your beloved family members or friends in that parade. But what does it feel like when you see opponents or people who have hurt you or for whom you have little respect? However, it feels, join in God's own statement as a prayer, saying "We are one." The kindness of common humanity, the kindness of oneness, has a powerful healing effect. Even if it is hard. Give thanks.

Prayer: Gracious God, in Christ you make us one. We thank you for the kindness and challenge of that path. Help us today to move more deeply into a recognition of our oneness

and release any hard feelings in us that get in the way of that truth. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 20 – The Kindness of Holy Equity – Acts 2:4 – *All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

One of the things that is most startling and wondrous about the Pentecost story in the book of Acts is the Spirit's gift of equity. We often focus on the doves and the fire in the story. That stands to reason. Peace and purifying power are things we all still need today. When we look at the miracle of the common language, however, sometimes we tend to think that this was a demonstration of the gift of speaking in tongues. As if all those present were given that gift at the same time and that is how they understood each other. That is not the case. The text tells us that each person spoke in his or her own language and was able to understand the languages others spoke. This is why this passage is sometimes seen as the reversal of the scattering of languages with the Tower of Babel in Genesis. What strikes me as of supreme importance is that the Holy Spirit's first action, as a result of the dove of peace and the purifying fire, was an act of language justice. In this story no one language is dominant. All do not suddenly speak Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek. Each is on an equal footing. No one is subordinated to the powerful or the majority. All stand on their own equally blessed and filled. What a vision of kindness! Language is power. It is the power to describe one's world, one's needs, one's experiences, one's hopes and dreams. In this story we see that in the kingdom of God, power is shared. All stories are validated and valued. The people in this story come from many countries and languages. They may be believers, seekers, or interested bystanders who practice another religion or none. It didn't matter. All were equally given the gift of Spirit's presence and power. What kindness! In our day when we seem to sort people into hierarchies of value based on language spoken or ethnic heritage, if we pause and listen to the Spirit whispers in our hearts we will hear every language and every people. And we will understand each other as equal and equally loved and valued.

Prayer: Great God of All, we thank you that your Holy Spirit equips us to understand and value each other. Help us to awaken to your mighty kindness in order to give us strength to continue to work for equity and justice in your world. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 21 – The Fruit of Kindness – Galatians 5:22 - *By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*

The Apostle Paul is furious with the Galatian church. He thinks that they have missed the point of grace by urging Gentile converts to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law. The Galatians think that it is grace and Law together that save a person. Paul spends the majority of his letter addressing that problem which he sees as a theological slippery slope. While he is careful to maintain that we do not save ourselves by being good, he is also clear that Christians are to live holy lives as an expression of our gratitude and spiritual maturity. In Chapter 5 he paints a picture of the qualities of life lived by the broken ego's standards, and then gives us the beautiful picture of what life lived in the Spirit looks like. We talk about these qualities as the fruit of the Spirit. They are what Spirit does in us because they

are what Spirit *is* in us. The fruit of the Spirit is not a menu that can be pulled apart and chosen bit by bit. Some aspects may come to fruit faster, and more bountifully, in us than others, but they are all in us and a part of the path toward holiness. Kindness, *Chrestotes* in Greek, is sometimes translated as goodness in the New Testament. *Chrestotes* refers not just to being sweet and not hurting people's feeling when we could. It is more substantial than that. It means to be gracious, to find goodness easy, to display integrity, to be drawn to excellence in personal behavior and to be quick to support excellence in others. It is to be benevolently serviceable, especially when it would be easier not to be. Today as you ponder your adventure into kindness, ask yourself how you see this quality operative in your life. In what ways do you find kindness easy? How do you exhibit integrity and excellence in your personal behavior? Is there a way that you can be benevolently serviceable when it would be easier not to be? Today, let's begin an experiment I call LARK. Lark stands for Little Acts of Random Kindness. What will be your LARK today?

Prayer: God of Kindness, we thank you for all of your goodness to us. We especially thank you for the gift of the Holy Spirit to be our guide and inspiration for kindness. Help us today to look for ways to be kind and to act on them even if we would rather not. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 22 – The Fruit of Kindness – 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 – *We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: in great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; in purity of knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute.*

In the Corinthian letters, once again, Paul is writing to a troubled church. They are all over the place, not agreeing on much, discriminating against the poor in favor the wealthy, totally confused about money, sex and gender. They are fighting about almost everything and they don't like each other much. And yet, they love the Lord and are most are sincerely trying to figure out how to live a holy life. In this section Paul is urging them not to allow the grace they have been given in Christ to come to nothing. He uses himself as a kind of object lesson to help them see that even during times of hardship and disagreement we have the capacity to live in kindness, love, patience, truth and the power of God. He reminds us that how we treat each other is what the world sees and our reputation for love and kindness (and all the other qualities listed) is our evangelism. I think of a conversation with a new friend who is ministering among the desperately poor in India. He said that when Christians try to speak of Christ to the non-Christian community, people do not want to listen. But when someone they do not know, who is a Christian, gives them a blanket, then they become more open to the Gospel because they have seen it at work. Today how can you display kindness and goodness to someone that you do not know and may never meet? How can you discern what a truly kind action might be? Can you offer kindness with no need for recognition or return? If things are hard for you, how do you maintain a kind and grateful heart? As you examine your heart and pray to grow in kindness, what will be your LARK (Little Act of Random Kindness) for today?

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Prayer: Gracious God of Every Kindness, thank you today for the kindness with which you shower us in good times and in hard times. Help us today to be a vehicle for your kindness in the world. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 23 – The Fruit of Kindness – Ephesians 2:7 – *so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

When I was in college, I had the opportunity to participate in a summer study program at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. At the end of the summer we took an excursion to Greece and Turkey. I was able to visit the ancient city of Ephesus to which the book of Ephesians is addressed. It was a hot late summer day and the worn stone walkways in the great theater that once held 50,000 people, were warm and mellow feeling. I took off my sandals and felt the awe in my body of walking where faith ancestors walked. I remember tearing up and not having words to describe the mystical wonder I was feeling. Thinking back, I can't help but reflect on that day in light of the the main theme of the Ephesian letter: that the church is the mystical body of Christ and one in all of its manifestations. Today's verse comes in the midst of a section about what it is like to be made truly alive in Christ. The author paints a picture of grace as a way of life throughout all eternity. He tells us that sin is behind us. We are saved by grace and because of that we will always be in a place, and state of being, awash in the richness of God's loving kindness toward us. It is a beautiful picture of transformation in this life and lavish kindness in the next. Since we have been saved by grace and incorporated into Christ, we both receive eternal kindness and offer grace and kindness to others in the here and now. If you live in a warm place, I invite you to take off your shoes for a moment today and walk on a sidewalk or ground warmed by the sun. If it is cold where you are, light a candle and feel it's warmth as you hold your hands safely above the flame. Take a moment to thank God for the incredible eternal kindness of God's grace. As you feel the wonder of that grace, ask God to show you how to share the kindness of forgiveness and grace with someone in particular today. What LARK (Little Act of Random Kindness) will you offer today?

Prayer: God of Grace and Kindness, we thank you for the wonders of living as your body in this life and in the glow of your love for all eternity. Help us today to feel the warmth of your kindness and find ways to share it with others. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 24 – The Fruit of Kindness – Ruth 1:8 – *But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me."*

The beautiful pastoral story that is the book of Ruth takes place during the period of the Judges, one of the bloodiest times in Israel's history. It is the story of one family who becomes pivotal to God's plan of salvation. The story begins when Naomi and Elimelech a couple from Bethlehem with two sons, leave their home to migrate to Moab to find a livelihood during a famine in Israel. Over time, they settle there and their two sons marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. The three men tragically die leaving their widows without resources and hope. Naomi is so engulfed in her grief that she even changes her

name to Mara which means Bitterness. She is determined to send her beloved daughters-in-law back to their birth families in the hope that new husbands can be found for them. But Ruth and Orpah refuse to go. Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem to see if a kinsman might help her. So the three women set out together, Naomi urging them to go home all the way. Eventually Orpah obeys and goes back to her family, but Ruth will not. She utters one of the most beautiful speeches in all of scripture: "Do not press me to leave you or to return from following after you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God." As the story, often hilariously, unfolds, Ruth becomes the ancestress of the great King David and ultimately of Jesus. She is the only person in the scriptures of whom the word, *chesed* (Loving kindness, loyalty) is used. She could not be shaken off of Naomi. Even in their shared grief, Ruth's loving kindness allowed them to chart a new future. Sticking with people when their lives are filled with grief or torn asunder in some unexpected way is often the key ingredient to healing and new starts. Loving kindness like Ruth's may take us into unexpected territory and it may seem easier to turn back, but the journey of kindness always bears fruit. Today, ask yourself if there is someone who needs your loving kindness today? Is there anyone who has become embittered with life? How might you walk with them in that journey? What LARK (Little Act of Random Kindness) might you offer today?

Prayer: Gracious God, we know that many of your beloved children have given up hope for a better life or have embraced bitterness as their daily food. Show me today how I can offer loving kindness to one such person today. Give me courage to walk their journey with them. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 25 – The Fruit of Kindness – Titus 3:4 – *But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*

Titus was probably a Gentile from Antioch who was brought to Christ by the Apostle Paul a number of years after Paul himself was converted. Titus traveled with Paul at times and Paul regarded him as his own spiritual son. This letter offers advice on a number of church administrative issues such as the qualifications for elders and the specific duties of older and younger members. The section from which today's verse is taken has to do with behavior, particularly what Godly behavior looks like in daily life. Paul cannot help but reiterate the main miracle of Christianity from his point of view: that we are saved by grace and not by works and that all of that is the result of the loving kindness of God. As he makes his point again, Paul urges believers to be careful to engage in good deeds. Paul understands good deeds to be kindness in action. One of the blessings of the spiritual life is that we have God's own behavior to help us understand what loving kindness looks like. Paul goes on to tell us that Christian loving kindness that results in good deeds shuns strife, disputes and foolish factions. Think today about how you can show loving kindness and mercy to those with whom you disagree, even if the disagreement is about something very important to you. How might you show kindness to an opponent without either harsh judgment or a compromise of your own personal integrity? Is there a LARK that you could offer simply based on your shared humanity? Is there a good deed you can do? If it is hard to think of one that will not be too hard, or worse yet, dangerous, sit quietly with God for a moment

and ask for guidance. Perhaps just lifting the other person up in sincere prayer can be your LARK for today.

Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you once again for your transforming loving kindness lavished upon us. Help us today to refrain from factions and divisions and to find the good works you have for us to perform today. In Jesus' holy name I pray. Amen.

Day 26 – The Fruit of Kindness – Acts 28:2 – *The local people showed us unusual kindness.*

Nearing the end of the book of Acts, we find that Paul and his companions have survived a shipwreck and many persecutions when they arrive safely on the shore of the island of Malta off the boot of what is now Italy. Paul is on his way to Rome. He is under arrest and scholars believe that it is likely that he dies outside of Rome several years later. Today's verse gives us another look at the power and opportunity of kindness. When the bedraggled travelers arrive safely in Malta, the local people show exceptional kindness to them. The word Paul uses for local people, barbarians, likely refers to non-Christians. The word he uses for their kindness is *philanthropia*. That word refers to open hearted human friendship that is marked by good will, hospitality, tenderheartedness and a willingness to go out of one's way to help others. In this incident, the locals build a fire and offer all kinds of aid and acceptance. After a very strange little incident with a viper that comes out of the branches when the fire is started, the locals are both curious and open to the gospel. It is important to note, however, that they offer their kindness before any of that. They offer kindness simply because it is needed. Sometimes we can come to think that kindness must be reserved for those who somehow deserve it, or with whom we agree or share fellowship. In this verse we are reminded that that is not the case. Not only that, when we offer kindness it often sets in motion the opportunity for relationships and sharing that change all involved. Can you think of a time when you received kindness from an unexpected source, perhaps from someone that you did not think highly of? Have you ever offered *philanthropia* type kindness, true open hearted friendship and a willingness to help, to someone that you did not think deserved it? If not, maybe today is the day! What LARK might you offer to a stranger or someone in need whose story you do not know?

Prayer: Gracious God of Loving Friendship, help us today to offer your kindness and help to any who are in need simply because they need it. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 27 – The Fruit of Kindness as First Impressions – Col.3:12 – *Therefore as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*

When I was a little girl, I loved to play dress up. My mother often let me play in one of the gowns that she had for formal dances when she was in college. My favorite was a long magenta gown made of a substantial but slinky fabric that would have been worthy of Myrna Loy in the old Thin Man movies. It had thick gold braid at the waist and at the shoulders. I can still feel its weight on my little body and how prone I was to trip on it. I loved, as I imagined, looking like my beautiful and sophisticated Mama. I imagined that

when my friends saw me in that dress, they would see a carbon copy of her. I always think of that memory when I return to this marvelously beautiful passage in the book of Colossians. Here the author describes the clothes we as Christians are to wear in order to be carbon copies of our savior Jesus. Sometimes we may find them ill-fitting and trip ourselves up a bit, but when we put them on, in a very real sense we are hoping that when people see us, they will see straight through us to the values of Jesus. In other words, what the author of Colossians is telling us is that the qualities of Christ that are most visible in our lives are often people's first impressions of Jesus himself. Kindness is close to the top of the list. Sadly, though, sometimes kindness is not the first impression that we give. Help us to notice what we are reflecting to others and how they feel when they are around us. In what ways today can you 'put on' genuine compassionate kindness as you go about your daily tasks? What LARK will you offer others today in your quiet quest to look and act like Jesus?

Prayer: Gracious Jesus, you are our model and we long for your values to be reflected in our lives so that you may love others through us. Help us today to choose kindness as our clothing and thereby help others to receive your kindness in their lives. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 28 – The Kindness of Listening – Luke 8:47-48 – *When the woman realized that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him and how she had been immediately healed. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.”*

As a person who has dealt with chronic health problems since childhood in a country without universal health care, I have always identified with this unnamed woman who spent all she had on one healer after another and yet grew worse and worse. What touches me most about this story, however, is not her miraculous healing. It is not even her amazing courage to reach out to Jesus or her hope that this time it might be different. Although those do amaze me. What touches me most is that after she reaches out and receives healing, Jesus seeks her out for conversation. He knew the healing was not complete until he listened to her story! That was when he declared that she was truly well and not just cured. He knew that only then could he send her into her new life in peace. Jesus listened to her and, in the listening, saw what she was made of. I absolutely love the kindness of that! Sometimes we focus so much on outcomes that we discount the intimacy of relationships that take healing to wellness. Jesus knew this inside out. He was a story teller and a listener. His stories helped people connect with both God and their own selves. When that happens some sort of healing always results. What is beautiful about our scripture is that in Jesus' listening, he does not judge the woman. He doesn't question why she, an unclean person, would reach out to touch him? He doesn't ask what she might have done to cause her distress. He doesn't give advice. He just listens, sees her whole truth as she opens up in vulnerability. He declares her as close to him as his own child and takes healing to wholeness. Is there anyone in your life that needs the kindness of your listening ear today? Are there any individuals in your home or neighborhood that you have not taken time to really check in with lately? How and to whom can you offer the LARK of listening today?

When you decide to listen keep Jesus' model in mind. Don't judge. Don't chastise. Don't try to fix. Just listen. God will do the rest.

Prayer: Gracious God of the Listening ear; help us today to listen mindfully to those around us. Use us as you will to bring healing and wholeness to all we meet. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 29 – The Kindness of Standing with the Oppressed – Exodus 3:7 – *Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey.”*

In this glorious passage in the book of Exodus, God gives Moses his most important mission. God wants Moses to go back to Egypt, the country where he was raised as a prince and fled after murdering an Egyptian soldier for beating a Hebrew slave, and tell the Pharaoh to set the slaves free. Granted, it took talking shrubbery to get Moses' attention as he was going about his ordinary day tending his father-in-law's sheep. And granted, Moses would take some convincing of his suitability for the task and an assurance of God's identity before he would set out. But still. What a moment. What a mission. Moses would have to go home, face the demons he thought he had outrun, and the powers that cowed the world to accomplish it. I imagine that the only thing stronger than Moses fear and reluctance was God's incredible compassion. This passage gives us a picture of the compassionate kindness of God and the powerful kindness of standing with the oppressed. Allowing ourselves to be useful vehicles of God's kindness and release is one of the most important acts of bravery and kindness that any of us can offer in our own lives. From a Biblical point of view, there can never be a justification for oppression in any form. It leaves God weeping and looking for people through which to address the issue. One of the kindest actions any Christian can take is to stand with, use what power and spiritual gifts we possess, to speak for the voiceless to the powerful. Are there those in your community who suffer from oppression in any form? Is there injustice in housing, work, food security, access to decision-making? If so, perhaps your LARK for today is to be a little Moses to stand for and with those who are being exploited. What is one small specific act of solidarity kindness that you might undertake today?

Prayer: Gracious God, lead us in kindness and solidarity with those who suffer from the hands, or simply from the mindless blindness, of others. Show us what to do and where to go, just as you did Moses. Equip us with your presence to go where you lead. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 30 – The Kindness of Sharing a Burden – Matthew 11:28-30 – *“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

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These beloved verses are poignant and rich in kindness. Jesus sees the fatigue of his followers. He knows that their lives are hard and that they sometimes feel that they can no longer carry their burdens. They are exhausted. We know how to feel that way too. Sometimes our family members suffer and we feel overwhelmed with trying to help them while keeping body and soul together ourselves. Sometimes our bosses are harsh taskmasters and we are worn out from the ways they push their problems onto us and expect more than is humanly possible. Sometimes the burden of past memories and shame is so heavy that we can hardly lift our eyes and feel that we must shoulder it all ourselves. Sometimes ends don't meet and we find the burden of having to juggle our child's school fees and giving them nutritious food a burden we just can't handle. Sometimes there is too much change too fast and we can't keep up. Sometimes there is not enough change fast enough and we are exhausted from trying to drag ourselves, our organizations, our communities forward. We know what it is like to be weary and heavy laden. The kindness of Jesus here is obvious on so many levels. First of all, he notices. It is powerfully kind for someone to notice when we are under the burden of too much. Second, he offers kind assistance. I think it is important to notice that he does not take the burdens from us completely. Rather, he shoulders them with us. He puts his strong shoulders, God's strong shoulders, in the yoke with us. Together the burden is lightened and we find that we are able to meet the challenges that once exhausted us easily and with joy. Partnering with Jesus in this life does not remove all our challenges. Rather, it gives us the added strength to meet them and to find joyful companionship in doing so. As always, what Jesus does for us, we are invited to do for others. Can you think of anyone today who needs you to come alongside them and help them carry a load that is too heavy for them? What load carrying LARK can you commit to today?

Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you for your loving kindness. Help us today to accept your invitation to come to you and allow you to help us carry the heavy loads of our lives. Help us, once refreshed by you, to offer our help to others who find their burdens too difficult to bear alone. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 31 – The Kindness of Commitment – Exodus 20:14 *“You shall not commit adultery.”*

There is little in this life more freeing and healing than having a trustworthy companion who keeps promises and steadfastly refuses to cause us harm in order to meet momentary needs. This is obvious in faithfulness to marriage vows. It is true in many other circumstances as well. When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, God was not just trying to build fences to corral our unruly behavior. Rather, God was painting a picture for us of what truly free and fulfilling life looks like. In that kind of life, commitments matter and so do the boundaries that allow those commitments to thrive. This is true in all of our relationships. No relationship can last in which we choose to make our own, often unexamined, desires more important than the feelings, safety and pain of others in our lives, homes, communities and even our global family. Being a trustworthy partner allows relationships to flourish and, indeed, for the world itself to flourish and heal. The prohibition is not just about who is doing what with whom in the bedroom. It is about taming our egos to such an extent that we are unwilling to cause pain to others with whom we have a commitment. As God's people we have a covenantal relationship with all people

on earth so the prohibition against causing pain, or using people in an unworthy way, applies to the ways we are willing to use others wrongly to meet our needs whether that is physically, economically or emotionally. Our commitments to others are the greatest kindness we can offer. Today, take a moment to consider your relationships. In what ways are you most faithful to the people in your life? Are there areas in which you are prone to lie or lash out just to meet a momentary emotional need? Do you ever look to your family and friends and expect them to meet all of your needs? Do you ever feel the need to wander from your commitments and chase something or someone flashy and new? If so choosing the kindness of commitment can be a daily practice that will deepen relationships and shape your own character. What LARK can you offer as a sign of your commitment to someone special to you today?

Prayer: Covenant God, your commitment to us is everlasting and unwavering. Help us today to see you as our model for how to commit to those closest to us and to the entire human family. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 32 – The Kindness of Taming the Tongue – James 3:5 – *So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.*

When I was a teenager, I remember my father coming home from work one day and sitting me down on the back porch for a talk. I don't remember anything about that talk except for one sentence. "Genie," he said. "Always think three consequences ahead of your mouth." I don't remember that I had done anything particularly egregious that he was trying to correct. My memory is not that he was disappointed with me or punishing me. Rather, I expect that he had spent all day in court (he was a judge) listening to people who's lives were upended by words spoken and actions taken without thinking of consequences. He was, as always, trying to protect me. I think that is what James was doing in today's verse when he urges the people in his congregation to get control of their speech. Words, as we learn in the beginning in Genesis, create things. They can create wonderful, powerful, loving situations. And they can create painful, chaotic and destructive situations. The truth is that we tend to become what we habitually say. If we constantly complain, we become people surrounded by people about whom to complain. If we constantly speak negatively, we ourselves become negativity. If we consistently denigrate others, we lose the capacity to lift others up, including ourselves. The ancestors understood that the tongue can wound more powerfully than a sword. Especially when the words spoken are untrue or intended to diminish the reputation or esteem of others. Gossip and inuendo have fueled many a rupture in a relationship or a church. Sometimes it is an act of supreme faithfulness to refrain from gossip and negative speech, but it is an act of faithful kindness. Are there times when you find yourself jumping to negative conclusions about others with no evidence? Can you keep confidences shared with you? Do you ever lash out with your tongue? Have you ever spread an unfounded rumor? If so, welcome to the human race! Today take a moment before God to examine how you use the gift of speech. If there are areas to confess, do so, trusting in God's power to forgive and restore. Notice today if you can hold your tongue in a situation in which you feel like speaking harshly. Let that be your LARK today.



Prayer: God of Grace, help us today to speak nothing but truth and kindness in every situation. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 33 – The Kindness of Seeing the Heart – Luke 7:36-50 – Please read in your own Bible.

This beautiful story of Jesus' interaction with a desperate sinful woman demonstrates kindness, although the word itself is not used. The story comes in the midst of a longer section of healing stories after Jesus' great sermon on the level place (on the Mount in Matthew) in which he gives the beatitudes and the command to love one's enemies. Words like those set things in motion that cannot be turned around. Love for all, even sinners and enemies results in unexpected healing and mercy. In Jesus' interaction with the distraught woman who bursts into the room as the men are reclined at table for a meal, stands behind him, anoints him with oil and her tears, and then wipes his feet with her hair, the disciples are dumbstruck. For a woman to let down her hair in public was a scandal itself, an indication of her sinful state and of her grief. The others no doubt want her dealt with harshly. What does Jesus do? He thanks her, praises her and uses her as an object lesson to show the men what devotion and faith look like. His kindness toward her in response to her kindness toward him gives us a dual picture of the power of kindness in our own lives. Kindness is extravagant. It does not always stay within the bounds of propriety. It is personal. It can even be costly. The ointment she brought with her to Jesus would have been worth a life savings for most people in that day. The kindness that Jesus offers in return by declaring her sins forgiven and praising her faith, comes from the capacity to see beneath her circumstances to a desperate heart filled with all the longings and shames of every heart. Today think about how you might offer lavish kindness to someone who has made a difference in your life. How can you do that personally? Think as well of how you might offer kindness to someone who has done something kind for you. Can you see behind the circumstances of someone to their longing heart? Is there a LARK that you can offer as a way of showing that you see the heart beneath the hurt?

Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you for the many and unexpected ways that kindness has been lavished upon us. Most especially we thank you for seeing our own hearts, forgiving our sin, and showing the great kindness of recognizing our faith. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 34 – The Kindness of Laughter – Luke 2:10 – *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."*

Antsy McClain and the Trailer Park Troubadours have a wonderful song called "*When you are Laughing.*" It is all about how the songwriter fell in love with a woman, not when he saw her looks, but when he got her laughing. He says that it is her laughter that brings the best out in him. I always imagine that kind of love-awakening laughter when I read the story of the angels' declaration to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth. By this time in the Biblical story the profession of shepherding had lost its earlier luster when Moses and later David worked as shepherds. In those days it was a profession of trust. By the time of Jesus' birth, shepherds were often hired by absentee owners and were as like to run off with the

sheep, or get drunk during the night and allow the sheep to wander away or be stolen, as they were to tend to them. For the angels to come to *them* on that one night with news that the world was turning and it was turning toward goodness and joy, must have resulted in belly laughs. If it had not been for the whole supernatural aspect of the revelation, I expect they might have rolled over on the hillside, blamed it on drink and gone back to sleep. But they didn't. There was something in their souls that wanted to see for themselves if the belly laughs of real joy, everlasting and unending joy, could actually be true. Perhaps the angels giggled a little too. How could they not? How can we not when we think of the outrageous love of God that burst into the world in flesh and bone in the form of a tiny baby that nobody had room for and whose very parentage was a scandal. This is how God saves? It is a hoot! Sometimes laughing with someone in times of confusion or grief is one of the kindest things we can ever do. It is a way of saying without words, what Antsy McClain and the angels said to the shepherds: I bring you good news of great joy! Joy is a fruit of the Spirit. It is at the heart of God's will for us. And not only that, it is warranted at all times even in times of sorrow or division. Why? Because it is who God is and what God is always bringing. Joy is not always dependent on our emotions, nor does it always erupt in laughter. Still laughing with others is kindness that unleashes just what it did for the shepherds: Hope and a desire to see for themselves that life can be good and joyful in even the worst of times. Today, think about how you can laugh with someone as your daily LARK.

Prayer: Gracious God, the universe pulses with your joy and laughter. Help us today to awaken to the absurdity of your love for us and laugh out loud as you bring out the best in us. Help us to share appropriate laughter, kind laughter, with others today. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 35 – Kindness Toward Strangers – John 4:1-30 – Please read in your own Bible.

Today I am asking you for a commitment, the commitment to take out your own Bible and read a long and complicated passage. It is the story of Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well. (If you want to study the passage carefully, there are study helps in the archive of Safe Harbor Presbyterian Church website.) This is the longest conversation between Jesus and a human being in the whole of the New Testament. In short, the woman that Jesus addresses is a Samaritan, the Jews ancient enemies. She is also likely an outcast in her community and has a very painful personal past. They have never met. His upbringing could have taught him to despise her. Her upbringing would have taught her to fear him. And yet, he initiates a relationship with her, even though the text tells us, he knew her whole story in that inward way of knowing so prominent in John's gospel. He did not chastise her for her bold inquisitiveness. He did not judge her for her family or her past. Rather, he shared the intimacy of a dipper of water with her. He talked theology with her and diffused some of her more divisive questions. He made no excuses for his encounter with her when his disciples returned from the market and were scandalized. He was simply there for her and with her. The result was that she became the first evangelist in John's gospel. After all, an evangelist is one who is sent by Jesus and tells the news of him. Sometimes we can miss the most powerful and unexpected grace when we make assumptions about people we do not know based on their family, faith or past. There is little more kind than seeing past those cultural blinders to the heart of another human being

and engaging with their questions, their pain and their outcast status. Think today about how you tend to categorize others and make assumptions about them. Are there those that you write off without knowing them? Are there beliefs or histories that are so abhorrent to you that you don't engage with those people or communities? Strangers are just siblings we have not met yet. Are there ways today that you can offer the kindness of recognition and a listening ear to a stranger? Of course we do not want to put ourselves in danger, so some caution is appropriate. So pray for discernment and Godly opportunity. Let that be your daily LARK.

Prayer: Gracious God, all of us are strangers until we find our rest in you. It is then that we realize that we are one. It is then that we know that all are our siblings. Help us today to examine our assumptions and offer kindness to strangers. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 36 – The Kindness of Waiting in Silence – Rev. 8:1 – *When the lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.*

The Book of Revelation can be confusing and frightening for some of us. As a matter of fact, during the 16th century Protestant Reformation, many urged preachers not to read from it on Sundays because people took it literally and it was not uncommon for parishioners to scream and run from the church when the lessons were read. That is still the case in some circles, sadly. Suffice it to say today that highly symbolic texts are always the child of the marriage of despair and hope. The main point is: Yes, things are bad. Yes, they may get worse. But that is temporary. God is on the move and God will work it out. The powers that are not God, whether they be oppressive governments or the power of evil itself, will never have the last word. God will see to it. That is my synopsis of the Book of Revelation. Today's verse comes immediately after the author's mystical vision of the great multitude that no one could count from all tribes, peoples and languages gathered in joy and praise around the throne of God. In the midst of this wonderful praise, the Lamb broke the seventh seal and the universe fell silent, waiting in the presence for what God's love and glory will do next. We all know from our own lives that sometimes things have to change to get better. We also know that change can be hard and painful. What touches me at this point in the vision is that when faced with the love and glory of God, and the pathway toward wholeness, the creatures sat mute for an hour and a half. What kindness for God to give them time to process next steps! What kindness for God to offer a period of restorative silence! In our culture many of us are rarely silent. We pick up our smart phones when we wake up and don't put them truly down until we go to sleep. We go from input to input whether that is digital or personal. We are so unaccustomed to silence that we can even fear it. What will it reveal about who we are, who we are not? I remember the first time I ever went on a silent retreat at a convent near my seminary. I took a suitcase of books, three changes of clothes, make up and electric hair curlers for my twenty-four hours of silence with the nuns! What I did not yet know, however, was the power and kindness of silence. It is in silence before God that all that still needs to be healed or purged in us emerges. It is in silence that the most profound sense of God's presence is often felt and creates spaces for what is truest to arise. Sometimes when we are unaccustomed to silence we can rush in with words that not only blur the truth, but can harm others. In many circumstances the

most loving and kind thing we can do for ourselves and others is to offer the gift of meaningful, humble, open hearted silence. Today, let your LARK be a time of silence. Even ten minutes can work miracles. When we become comfortable with our own deep silence, then and only then, can we experience the true intimacy of offering another person the gift of sharing silence.

Prayer: O Great God of the Universe, help us today to spare moments of true silence as we sit in the presence of your love and challenge. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 37 – The Kindness of Never Giving Up – Luke 15:1-7 – Please read in your own Bible

As a young child growing up in the southern United States, summers were spent going to Vacation Bible School. My friends and I would go for a week at a time to first one church and then the next. I especially remember the pride I felt when the whole town full of children arrived at my little Presbyterian church for the festivities. One of my favorite memories is of sitting cross legged on the faded red carpet at the front of the church while our teacher taught us the parable of the Lost Sheep using cut out figures on a felt board. It was wondrous. As a chronically ill only child, I identified with the sheep that was alone and cut off from the herd. I imagined Jesus finding me as a wheezed alone at home. I saw him lifting me on his strong shoulders to take me back to the other sheep who were, as I imagined, drinking red Kool-Aid and eating Animal Crackers. When the lesson was over, we ran to the fellowship hall for snack and then art where I colored in my picture of Jesus with the lamb, made a staff from pipe cleaners and glued cotton ball clouds onto the sky. I asked the leader if she had any glitter. "Why, Genie?" she asked. "Because I know the lamb must glitter when Jesus finds her. He just never gave up on her." Isn't that the way it is? Sometimes when we have given up on ourselves, or found ourselves hopeless lost in the weeds of an out of control life, we too need Jesus to never give up on us. This passage makes it clear that he never will. There is little kinder than not giving up on someone. Is there anyone in your life today that you can reassure that you will be there for them no matter what? Let that be your LARK today.

Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you from the depths of our being that you love us and never give up on us. We thank you that your will is to restore us to both safety and community. Help us today to be your deputy shepherds, reaching out to those who are lost and alone to bring them safely home. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 38 – The Kindness of Sharing – Matthew 14:13-21 – Please read in your own Bible

The bible contains many stories of miraculous feeding, from manna in the wilderness in the Old Testament to today's story often called the feeding of the 5000. In this story, Jesus has just heard about the arrest and subsequent execution of his cousin John the Baptist. Upon hearing the news, he withdraws in a boat to a quiet place by himself in order to come to terms with it and to pray. The crowds of people in the area follow him. When he comes to shore, there they all are, thousands of them, suffering in every possible way. Jesus is moved with compassion and begins to heal them. As nightfall approaches, his disciples tell Jesus to send the crowds home so that they can buy food for themselves. Jesus, in a characteristic

flash of brilliance, tells the disciples to feed them instead. They can't imagine how to do this with only five loaves and two fish. And yet, when what they have to offer was put into Jesus hands, there was enough and more than enough. Even the crumbs leftover were not wasted. Nothing put into Jesus' service is ever, ever wasted. Sometimes in the complexity of a hurting community with so much inequity and so much need, it can feel like we do not have enough to make a difference. This is true both of meeting physical needs of hurting people as well as emotional and spiritual needs. The question that this passage stirs is not so much the physics of how a small food supply could satisfy so many. The question that stirs is: how do I offer what I have at my disposal as a tool for Jesus' works of compassion and filling? The act of sharing what we have, whether great or small, is an act of profound and compassionate kindness. Not even the smallest crumb of what we offer will be wasted. Ask yourself today where the need is in your community, or even your home or workplace. Who is hungry or hurting of heart or body? What do you have that you can share in Jesus' name? How will you go about doing that today? Let that be your LARK.

Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you for all the gifts and resources with which you fill our lives. Help us today to put all that we have and are in service to you knowing that we are simply sharing with your children what already belongs to you. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 39 – The Kindness of Withholding Judgment – Luke 6:37a – “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.”

In contentious times it can feel like the only right and good thing is to judge others for their actions that either appall us or damage us. In the Bible as well as in most forms of government in the world, it is usually appropriate to hold people accountable for wrong and immoral actions. Accountability and judgement, while often using the same language, are not the same thing. Accountability, at least in the Bible, is about fair consequences for wrongdoing. It is NEVER about punishment per se, but always for the purpose of reform. The kind of judgement Jesus is speaking of in today's text is a bit different. Today's verse builds on the previous verse which is all about mercy. Here he uses a word that means 'to divide, to separate, to make a distinction or come to a decision.' It is usually used in a judicial sense, with condemn, to speak of passing a sentence that is solemn or consequential. Is Jesus saying, then, that we should not uphold the judicial system and sit on a jury if called? I don't think so. Rather, I think Jesus is pointing us to the thorny and more prevalent arena of deciding the truth about other persons and their actions and assigning blame without the facts or the authority to take action. The scriptures, from the Ten Commandments onward, take people's reputations very seriously. The ancestors used gossipy judgment as an example of killing, stealing and perverting the judicial system. The truth of the matter is that only God knows the whole story and so only God can declare it and its consequences. We are not to judge. We are to constantly bathe our thoughts with mercy instead. The old saying, “There but by the grace of God go I” is an important filter before we make judgments about other people. When we offer the kindness of reserving judgment we open a pathway not only for reform of the one we are considering, but a pathway for awareness of our own shortcomings as well. After all, we often find that we resoundingly condemn in others what we most fear, or are blind to, in ourselves. Today, take

a moment to think about anyone that you find it easy to judge. What triggers that for you? Can you see the same tendencies in yourself in different clothes? Decide today that you will neither condemn others or yourself. It is harder than you think! Let that be your LARK for the day.

Prayer: God of Grace, we are so often quick to judge and to condemn. We are often lacking in a substantial mercy that would transform our hearts, relationships and world. Help us today to avoid harsh judgment of others and ourselves so that your kind mercy can mend our flaws and heal our world. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 40 – Kindness Toward the Mentally Ill – Mark 5:1-20 – Please read in your own Bible.

In today's story Jesus is confronted by an individual who suffers from what we might today call severe mental illness. He has burned every bridge, as is too often the case even in our day. His neighbors had tried everything to the point of trying to capture him and tie him down, but he always broke free, such was the power of his torment. This is a complex passage that, in my opinion, has often been misused in a way that has subjected tormented people to additional torment. Most of us are not mental health professionals and we do great harm when we overly literalize scriptures to do what we are not capable of doing. Still, I think there is marvelous kindnesses in this story that we can practice in our own lives as we interact with people dealing with anxiety, depression and other challenges. Look at the dynamic. The man was living in a cemetery and doing self-harm. His past pain and present affliction were such that when Jesus asked his name he told him it was Legion, or Many Soldiers. His tender and beloved self was under siege by a great battalion of irrational thoughts that he could not conquer. He needed help and he needed to be seen not just as his illness but as a person. Jesus did that when he stopped what he was doing and asked the man his name. Many of us have inner wars that sometimes dominate us. We live in the past (cemetery) and we slice ourselves wide open with helplessness and shame. We can even become so accustomed to our pain that it is terrifying to think about being free from it. It may be awful; be we know it. It may define us but who would we be without it? When we or our loved ones find ourselves in that situation, perhaps it is not our job to offer cure, but rather to stop, be present and ask people to tell us their name. Maybe they will lead with their hurt, but beneath it a new name will emerge. The kindness of listening as hurting people find their way is a way to model Jesus and, sometimes over time, to witness miracles. Today stop and ask yourself if Jesus desires to use you to listen to someone who is battling mental illness. If that someone is you, ask yourself what your real name is and repeat it again and again. If it is someone else, can you spend a few minutes with that person, focusing on them and not their illness? If so, let that be your LARK today.

Prayer: Gracious God of Healing Grace, help us today to stop, listen and seek the real inner name of those who are hurting. Use us as you will, to show your own kindness and attention. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 41 – The Kindness of Forgetting the Painful Past – Philippians 3:13 – *Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting*

what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul is in prison under horrendous conditions. His friends in Philippi have sent an offering to him to help him get food while in jail. This letter, one of his most soaring and joyful, is in part a thank you note and in part a sharing of the joy and solace he finds in Christ even when things are at their worst. In this section he is sharing with them about his assurance that, no matter what, he is following Christ to an ultimate victory. In the previous verse he told them that he knew he had not yet fully become all that Christ made him to be. His greatest longing is to fully share everything with Christ. In today's verse he acknowledges that he has a way to go yet. He recognizes that one of the greatest impediments to spiritual progress is clinging to the past and pointing our energy backwards and not forwards. I think this may be easier for the young than the elderly who often, erroneously, think we have more past than future. This is, of course, only true in the physical earthly sense. Still, I don't think Paul means to urge us to delete our memories. They can often be sources of great joy and learning. I think what Paul is urging is that we not to let our past become the sole template for our future. If we are growing in Christ daily, we are closer today than yesterday, wiser today than yesterday, more our true selves today than yesterday. That being the case, the past while valuable, cannot be allowed to limit our forward motion. Paul, like all of us, had a truly checkered past. If he let his former persecution of the church haunt him unduly he would never be able to put his best energy into moving forward in the unending stream of God's healing grace. Perhaps you carry some sorrow about your past. Perhaps you were mistreated by people you loved. Perhaps you made choices that, looking back, cause you shame, or set in motion consequences you never intended but could not contain. You can always look at those things and learn from them. What Paul is cautioning is giving them too much room in the heart or letting the expectations that arose from them set the agenda for your future. In Christ you are not bound by your past. You are moving forward in love toward more love. Always. Such is the kindness of God. Can you think of anyone who seems locked in the past? Are they hampered by guilt? Are they repeating patterns? Do they expect to receive what that have always received? How might you gently encourage them to look forward and not backward today? Let that be your LARK.

Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you for every bit of our lives, the joys, miracles, sorrows and confusions. Help us today to release the past into your care, carrying its wisdom but refusing to be defined by what is gone. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 42- The Kindness of Enemies – Luke 10:25-37 – Please read in your own Bible.

Today's story is one of kindness between enemies. We call it the story of the Good Samaritan. It is such a well-known story that the phrase 'good Samaritan' is applied to anyone who stops to help another in distress. In this story a Samaritan stops to help someone who had been beaten and left bleeding on the side of the road. The power of the story lies in the animosity between the Jews and Samaritans. By Jesus' day the feelings were centuries old and virulent. Some leaders even taught that Samaritans were worse than Gentiles. Gentiles were so despised that some taught that it was illegal to help a Gentile woman in labor because it was just bringing another Gentile into the world to pollute it.

Theological and tribal animosities ran deep. Jesus tells this story in the context of being grilled by religious leaders who were trying to trick him into vindicating their less than loving behavior. They want to find a way to weasel out of responsibility for caring for neighbors by narrowly defining who fit into that category. They wanted to believe that only good Jews deserved to be called neighbor and receive care. Jesus would have none of that! In this story the 'despised' Samaritan is the hero while the 'good' priest and Levite go out of their way to avoid helping the man who is bleeding by the roadside. There were issues of ritual purity involved obviously and we don't really know whether the Samaritan could tell that the hurting man was a Jew or not in his terrible state. The point, however, is that when the Samaritan saw pain, he sought to address it concretely, specifically and at great cost when the religious leaders did not. It is this kind of mercy that Jesus asks his followers to emulate. We live in a time where ancient animosities rear their ugly heads as well. Jesus' call to offer kindness and mercy to those we think of as opponents or unworthy is often hard for us too. Here and in many other passages in the New Testament, Jesus urges his disciples to do all they can. He urges not to be bound by our animosities or even our religious beliefs when it comes to helping those in trouble. Tall order! Today, take a moment to honestly ask yourself if there is anyone, any group, that you consider to be your 'untouchable' or unworthy of help? Are any of them in dire need? How can you be Samaritan today to hurting strangers regardless of their ideology, nationality or religion? See if you can think of one way to show kindness and mercy to someone that you are not drawn to like. Let that be your LARK today.

Prayer: O Gracious God, you see all people as your beloved children. Help us today to remove the labels and judgments that keep us from offering kindness when we could. Use us today as living parables of mercy in whatever way that you need us. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 43 – The Kindness of Serving Others – John 13:1-20 – Please read in your own Bible.

Today is the 40th anniversary of my ordination to ministry in the PCUSA. It seems in some ways like yesterday that I gathered with friends and family on a stormy day at Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church in Louisville Kentucky and heard the thunder clap as elders, pastors, seminary professors gathered around me for the laying on of hands. I had no real idea what the life of ministry would look like. I didn't know what I would be asked to do. I did not know where I would be asked to go, or how intimate and holy the task would be. What I did sense I think, through a glass dimly no doubt, was that there is nothing more profound in life than serving others to the best of our ability. Granted, I have not always done that well. I have often *not* done that well. But others have always picked up the slack when I faltered. That is miracle indeed. Today's exquisite passage from John's gospel gives us a poignant look at the kindness of serving others. Jesus and his friends are gathered in the upper room. He, if not they, knows that the storm clouds are gathering and he will likely die as a result of them. In John's account of the upper room, there is no institution of the Lord's Supper, no 'take and eat, take and drink in remembrance.' In John, Jesus himself becomes the sacramental object lesson for what intimacy with Christ and the road of discipleship is to look like. Here he takes off his robe, the symbol of status and protection, wraps a towel around his waist,

takes a basin of water and washes each of the disciples' feet. This was the role of servant, a lowly servant at that. He washed the feet of his friends. He washed the feet of Peter who would betray him three times that night and Judas who would sell him to his death within the hour. In taking that holy action, he declares that ministry in his name is not to privilege. It is only and always to service. Today, take a moment to reflect on your life in Christ. Have there been moments where you felt called to serve in a particular and maybe lowly way? What was that like? In a spirit of prayer, ask your heart the question: Are there feet that need washing today? What privilege and status might I need to set aside to do that? Where is the 'water' I need to offer? Who needs a hand in getting clean? Is there a little act of random kindness I can perform today? If a special call arises from this prayer, let that be today's LARK.

Prayer: O Gracious God, you have shown us what the kindness of serving others looks like and what it costs. Help us today to follow your example, to abandon status and position if we need to, in order to offer the powerful kindness of service. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 44 – The Kindness of Choosing Not to Retaliate – Romans 12:17 – *Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought of what is noble in the sight of all.*

In today's verse, the Apostle Paul has stopped preaching and 'gone to meddling.' In Romans, his last and most theologically intense work, he is speaking to members of a church he did not found but hopes to visit. He wants them to understand who he is and what he believes so that they may partner with him in his dream of taking the gospel as far away as Spain. In the section from which today's verse is taken, he is sharing what he believes to be the moral and behavioral marks of a true Christian. Verses 9-21 would be a good mission statement for all of us, one that it would be useful to read daily. In it he reminds us that our love must be authentic and not counterfeit. He tells us to rejoice in hope, be patient in affliction, persevere in prayer, contribute to the needs of the saints, pursue hospitality to strangers. He then urges us to bless those that persecute us, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those that weep, live in harmony with others and more. In verse 17 he begins a thought stream about the importance of living life in a non-retaliatory way. Christians are simply not to return evil for evil. Period. Those of us who live in the United States live, and have always lived in my view, in a culture that equates strength and winning with retaliation. If an enemy harms us, leaders contemplate how to retaliate. If individuals harm others the legal systems figure out how to hold them accountable and to punish (retaliate.) Paul sees the fruitless and escalatory nature of retaliation. His thinking is rooted in Jesus' admonition to turn the other cheek, pray and work for the good of enemies. One of the problems we often have with this teaching is that we think of it as weakness. Nothing could be farther from the truth. To choose to live in a non-retaliatory way requires enormous and concentrated strength. It rests on the bedrock understanding that what others do to us does not get to determine our behavior. Only Christ gets to do that. Only the love of God manifest in Christ gets to set our agenda. Only God gets to rule. Wow. Today take a moment to ponder what a world, or your own life, might look like if retaliation for harm was taken off the table. Would it mean no accountability? Would it mean refusing to resist evil? Would

it mean cowering or fleeing? Obviously, I don't think it means any of those things. But what do you think? Let today's LARK be your honest reflection on this concept.

Prayer: Gracious God, how kind you are to us. You do not retaliate against us when we fall short of your values or cause harm to ourselves and others. Rather, you strengthen, mend, inspire and restore us again and again. Help us today to think deeply with you about the teaching of today's verse and to be transformed, if needed, by our time with you. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 45 – The Kindness of Loving – Luke 6:35 – *“Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return.”*

Yesterday we pondered what a non-retaliatory life might look like. Today we take that a step farther. It is one thing not to retaliate. It is another thing to love those who we think seek our harm or undoing. Remember that the word translated 'love' in this verse does not mean affection. Jesus is not saying that we must fall in love with, or even feel warm Hallmark cardy about enemies. He is not even saying we need to like them personally. He is saying, rather, that we are to unconditionally seek God's highest good for them. We are called to behave just like God has, and does, toward us when we ourselves sometimes act like enemies of the gospel. This verse can be nearly incomprehensible when looked at from a wider societal perspective. But it is not much easier to grasp on a smaller personal level. Still, it is crucial and basic for deepening spiritual growth and discipleship. Today think for a moment about anyone who feels like an enemy to you. Has anyone hurt you in such a way that you think in us versus them terms? Is there anyone that you fear might not have your best interests at heart? How might God want you to do good for those persons? (The word we translate as good here is sometimes also translate as generosity. It refers to love on its feet. It is goodness that makes things happen. It is the kind of goodness the late Rep. John Lewis meant when he urged us to make good trouble.) Is there a "good kindness" that you might offer today? As you think about that, notice if you feel a new sense of freedom as you release enemies to love. Can you think of a small step you might take today in this regard? If nothing occurs to you, practice praying God's best for your enemies. Let that be your LARK for today.

Prayer: Gracious God, we are sometimes overwhelmed with the call to love all people, even those we have come to regard as enemies. Help us today to reframe those relationships with love and seek the good of others. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 46 – The Kindness of Forgiving – John 8:1-11 – Please read in your own Bible

For the last several days we have been thinking about how we relate to others, especially to those we fear or who have harmed us. Jesus and the apostle Paul both taught that we are not to retaliate but rather we are to love and seek the good of our enemies. Perhaps the key to how to do that can be found in today's passage. This is the story of Jesus interaction with a woman caught in adultery. This story is one of the most beautiful examples of the power of forgiveness, and the shame of unforgiveness. A woman has been caught in adultery. The man is not brought and charged which is a story for another day in and of itself. An act was

considered adultery in the ancient world only if the woman was married. The marital status of the man was not a part of the equation. If he was married and the woman not, it was not considered adultery. Adultery was a violation of the rights of the woman's husband. It was, by law, punishable by death, although that penalty was not ordinarily imposed. Still, despite the technicalities of the law, this woman is brought to Jesus for judgment. The question that the scribes and Pharisees place before him is whether or not her sin is deserving of death. He brilliantly listens to their arguments and then says, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." At which point they slink away, one by one until only Jesus and the woman are there. Jesus has been writing in the sand and when he stands up he says, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus then said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again." Two things stand out to me in this story. First, Jesus refused to let her mistakes define her life or her worth. And second, he reminded the powers that be that, while their sin might manifest in different ways, they were themselves in no position to condemn her. Forgiveness in the Bible has to do with releasing others from the need to pay for the wrong they do. That release is primarily for the purpose of freeing the one who has been harmed. Forgiveness declares that the one who hurt us does not get to set the timeline or the agenda of our healing. Nor does the memory of the harm get to re-harm us again and again. We let it go, trusting that God will attend to what needs attending so that we can then live and out of the mercy that we ourselves have received. Today, I'd like to ask you to think about the self-kindness of forgiveness. It is not about saying that what happened was ok. If it had been ok, forgiveness would not be needed. It is about saying that what happened is not everything and does not get to rule us anymore. Is there someone that you struggle to forgive? If so, I urge you today to begin the process of letting go so that you can move forward. It may take time, but a start is a start. Offer that kindness to yourself as your LARK.

Prayer: Gracious God, help us to forgive as you have forgiven us. Help us to recognize in painful situations that, there but for your grace, go we. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 47 – The Kindness in Needing Help – John 21:18 – *Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.*

The last of the resurrection appearance stories in John's gospel ends in an enigmatic way. After Jesus and Peter conclude their conversation about loving and feeding the flock, Jesus uses a strange image that was interpreted by the gospel writer as a prophecy. Jesus uses the challenges of aging as a way of talking about how out of control life can become. The gospel writer sees this as a prediction of Peter's own martyrdom. Perhaps so, but there is more, isn't there? In offering us a picture of how out of control life can sometimes get, I notice that there is also a helper there. The gospel writer sees this helper as an executioner, fastening Peter to his own cross. I see the helper as a figure of kindness. Sometimes we need help. The older I get the clearer that becomes. Things I could once do easily are more difficult, if not impossible now. Mercifully, I can fasten my own belt and do not yet have to be led by the hand wherever I go. Still, I do find that I cling to Robbie's hand as we go down a flight of stairs. There is a tenderness in that small action. Sometimes kindness comes when we

recognize that we need help. Today practice thinking of your limitations as opportunities to receive kindness. Rather than sulking over what is passing away, open your heart wide to receive the kindness God sends to tenderly care for you and give you space to live and love. Jesus ends the strange story with simple command, "Follow me." If we take that seriously we will follow him to some helpless places, to our own kinds of crosses. What we know, however, no matter how hard things may become, is that his own hand of loving kindness is reaching out to help us even if we can't quite fasten our own belts. Today take a moment to thank God for all those who show you kindness by helping you when you need it. Let your LARK be a heartfelt thank you to those ones.

Prayer: God of Loving Kindness, we thank you for the grace of needing help sometimes and for the kindness of those you send to help us. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen!

Day 48 – The Kindness of Gentleness – Phil 4:5 *Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.*

The word for gentleness in Greek is fascinating. It refers to something that is fitting, equitable, fair, moderate, forbearing, not insistent on the letter of the law. Something or someone who expresses this characteristic offers even handed considerateness. A version of this word was often used to characterize a nurse with trying children or a teacher with difficult students. Some translate the word 'sweet reasonableness.' In today's verse, Paul is writing to special friends in Philippi. These members of the church pray for and support him in trying times. He is in prison as he writes. His circumstances are truly awful and yet he urges his friends to let their sweet reasonableness, their forbearance and moderation to be obvious in how they live and how they are seen in the community. In the dominant expressions of our faith in the United States, gentleness is not the first word that often leaps to mind. We sometimes associate this quality with being wishy washy or weak. As anyone who has ever sought to practice this type of gentleness knows, it is anything but. Being equitable in a world of inequality is hard work. Being moderate in a world of extremes is hard work. Finding the most fitting response in difficult circumstances is hard work. Refusing legalism is hard work when our precious values seem threatened. Pursuing sweet reasonableness in a violent and fractured time is hard, hard, hard work. It is counter-cultural and it cannot be counterfeit. Still, this quality may just be the most needed in our day. To open ourselves to gentleness requires that we learn to watch our reactions to things and people. It requires that we stretch our capacity to choose responses rather than react with first emotions. That is not easy but it is something that can be learned. So today, if you notice yourself reacting fiercely or negatively to anything, take a breath. Ask God to express sweet reasonableness through you. See if you can become aware of one particular circumstance where sweet reasonableness is the kindest thing you can do. Then respond for that newly centered position. Let this be your LARK for today.

Prayer: God of Grace, we thank you for the kind gift of sweet reasonableness and your Spirit's power to flow through us in all gentleness, moderation and forbearance. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.



Day 49 – The Kindness of ‘It’s None of Our Business’ – John 21:20-21 – *Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord who is it that is going to betray you?” When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about him?”*

Peter, surely wondering what is going on after all he has experienced, loses his battle with his ego one more time. In this last of John’s resurrection appearance stories, Peter and Jesus are walking together on the beach after the miraculous catch of fish and Jesus’ enigmatic telling Peter to feed his sheep. Peter turns and sees the beloved disciple following behind them. He asks Jesus what is to become of him, the beloved disciple with whom he has always had a bit of a rivalry. Behind that question is the age old desire to be number one. This is so natural. We want to be the most loved, special, and unique. In this case, apparently, Peter wants to know if he will outlive the beloved disciple. Jesus appears to lose a bit of patience here. (You can always tell that Jesus is exasperated or trying to emphasize something in scripture when the saying is punctuated by an exclamation mark.) Jesus shuts Peter down quickly, telling him that how Jesus relates to others is none of Peter’s business. Sometimes I think we have forgotten this lesson. We sometimes question how Jesus will relate to others who are not like us, don’t think like us, or with whom we feel a competitive spirit. We wonder what Jesus will do with them. What about *them*, Lord, we ask of those who claim the faith but do not seem to us to be claimed by it. What about *them*, Lord, we ask of those who call God by another name and read a different sacred book. Sometimes we need to be proven right so badly that we don’t care what God does with the ones we have decided are not right. Jesus has little patience with this. I would submit that he answers those questions of ours today with an exclamation point too. Today, breathe deeply and relax your shoulders. Remember that it is your job to love and proclaim Christ. It is not your job to decide who is in and who is out. That resides in the unfathomable grace of God. Jesus can be trusted to sort it all out. That itself is a kindness. How can you offer the kindness of knowing what is your responsibility and knowing what is not today? Be mindful not to use this as a cop out of legitimate responsibility, nor as a secret way to manipulate others. Let that be your LARK today.

Prayer: God of Grace: We thank you that some things are just none of our business! Help us today to relax and trust you to rule your world and love your children in exactly the right ways. In Jesus’ holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 50 – The Kindness of Enough is Enough – John 21:24 *But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*

As a writer, I can so identify with how John ends his gospel. He knows that there is so much more he could say, so many more wondrous and instructive stories he could tell about Jesus. Still, he, with the gift of special inspiration that he had, knows when enough is enough. There were lots of stories and first person accounts of life with Jesus that circulated by the time John wrote. Gospels of Thomas, Phillip, Mary Magdalene and even Judas have surfaced with many stories similar to the Biblical stories and others that are new and very different. What is so wondrous to me about John is that he knew when

enough was enough. A skill I can rarely master myself. He held to his purpose throughout: to testify to Jesus so that people may know that what is told of him is true. We may often want more. More insight. More experiences of Jesus. More stories to learn and into which we can enter. In the last verses of John, the gospel writer reminds us that while there is more, what we have is enough. We have enough to come to know him. We have enough to encounter him. And, we have enough to allow Jesus to continue his story through us in our own lives and daily companionship with our risen savior. So today, take a moment to breathe deeply. Set a three-minute timer and see how many stories from the life of Jesus that you can bring to mind in that space of time. Jot down a reminder or title to each story, such as Good Samaritan, Woman at the Well. Just enough to get the story in mind. Throughout the day when you pause in your responsibilities, choose one story and remind yourself of it in detail. If you don't remember it well, you can look it up. See if you don't find yourself smiling at the wonder of it all. Thank God that what you have been given of Jesus is enough, knowing that there will always be more just when you need it. Take a moment today to say thank you for the scriptures themselves. Perhaps you will have an opportunity to tell someone else how much the stories of Jesus bless and fill you. Let that be your Lark!

Prayer: God of Grace, we thank you for the stories of Jesus that have been handed down to us with such insight and care. Help us not to take this kind gift for granted. Help us today to receive the kind blessings you have for us in scripture. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 51 – The Kindness of Waiting for the Right Moment – Acts 1:3-4b – *After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.*

The Acts of the Apostles is part two of Luke's Gospel. Here we follow the early disciples, primarily Peter and Paul, as they moved out in witness after Jesus' ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Today's verse precedes all of that. The disciples, upon the instruction from the risen Christ, have stayed in Jerusalem. Jesus has appeared to them in many ways. Still, Jesus knows that it is time for him to ascend. He also knows that there is more that the Father has to give them. They, unfortunately are still stuck in their old mindsets of winning and restoration of power as the hallmarks of kingdoms. It will take the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to help them finally see what is real and durable. For now, Jesus asks them to wait on God's timing for the fullness of God's gifts to them. God still waits for the right moment in each of our lives in order to give us new gifts, insights, blessings and purpose. We may think we are ready and want all of it all at once. We want bounty today. We want filled sanctuaries today. We want complete understanding today. What we often forget is that waiting too has a spiritual purpose. As we wait for what God will bring, we become more attuned to God's wisdom and also to what we have already been given. We have to have a little time to incorporate and appreciate before a new gift can be truly good for us and for the world. So today, open your heart. Take a look at the spaces that you want to be filled with more love, bounty, success, mission and kindness. Look at that space and thank God that you are ready to receive when the time is right. Notice today the kindnesses and insights that come your way. Can you identify mindsets that are shifting and changing

inside of you? Offer God the kindness today of your open and expectant heart. Let that be your LARK today.

Prayer: God of Grace, we thank you for the gifts of waiting for your perfect timing for the blessings that you have for us. Help us to be ready and not to waste anything. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 52 – The Kind Grace of Baptism - Matthew 28:18-20 *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.*

For the next few days, we will return to the Great Commission in Matthew's Gospel and open ourselves to receive each of its elements. Today we receive the grace and power of our baptism. Baptism is a multi-leveled sacrament that, in my opinion, opens up fully in us over time. From the earliest times of humankind, peoples all over the world and from all cultures have embraced rituals of inclusion. These rituals mark participants and leave them fundamentally different from the way they were before. They mark them as a part of something bigger than they are, something that gives them identity, power and purpose. For Christians our inclusion ritual is the sacrament of baptism. In it we affirm that the baptized are children of God and a part of the household of faith. In the Reformed tradition, we baptize people of all ages, acknowledging that it is God who does the saving work in us and not our own understanding. We baptize people *into* faith and understand that as a beginning, or turning point, in their journey with God. When we are baptized it is not only a hedge against eternity, it is a road map for this life, filled with power, grace and growth. So today take a moment to thank God for the amazing kindness of your baptism. If you have not yet been baptized, you will always be welcome! Today, as your LARK, notice those around you who may be, or feel, excluded in some way. As a concrete expression of thanksgiving for your inclusion in the household of God, how might you help that other person experience the kindness of inclusion?

Prayer: God of Grace, we thank you that you claim us as your children. Today we bask in the grace and power of our baptism as we look with kind eyes for ways to include others. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 53 – The Kind Power of the Name - Matthew 28:18-20 *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.*

When Jesus tells the disciples to baptize others far and wide, a later editor of the text adds in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit to make it clear to us what kind of baptism Jesus was encouraging. To baptize in the name is to declare that the newly baptized will be empowered daily to claim their role as a child of God, to grow in knowledge of God, and to

fashion life according to God's values. When we move through our days as those baptized in the Name, we realize that we have been claimed into all that God is, values, desires and requires. When we are baptized we enter into a family of faith where we make commitments not just to God, but also to each other. This is why, in Presbyterian churches, baptisms are never private rituals but always celebrated in the worshipping community. When we are baptized we are never alone again. We are never without a place of belonging again. We may sometimes feel isolated and alone, granted. And faith communities have many failings that can make us want to flee at times. Still, from the moment we are baptized in the name we are a part of something that cannot be broken. We are a part of the household of God. In a prayerful Spirit today, ask God to lift to your mind others, within or without, your faith community who may be struggling with loneliness or feelings of isolation. Are there ways you might initiate or deepen your relationship with them? You may not need to say the Name, but in reaching out to others to ease their loneliness you are acting in the Name and that will always bear fruit. Let that be your LARK today.

Prayer: God of Grace, we thank you for the gift of bearing your name. Help us today to be more and more worthy of the name we bear. Fill us with the kind longing to include others in your household and to ease loneliness wherever we see it. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 54 – The Kindness of Teaching Obedience - Matthew 28:18-20 *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.*

The word teaching here means something like 'to cause someone to be a learner.' Jesus tells us in these verses that his desire for us is that we will cause others to learn obedience. What is obedience in the Bible? Does Jesus by that mean that we teach people all of the rules and make sure that we police them? Well, not exactly. The word in Greek means 'to attend, to willingly stand under, to order or sort something or to hear something with such power that it causes one to act on what is heard.' I hope you can see from these nuances that obedience is not simply about accepting the rules and doggedly keeping them, or else. Rather, obedience is about radical transformation of life and priorities such that one hears God's word, agrees to stand beneath the comfort of it and attend to it constantly. Sometimes we associate obedience more with our failures than our protection. We look at the many times we fail to live up to even our own standards, much less God's, and see the word obedience as a sword hanging over our heads. Certainly not a kindness. While there are certainly consequences for our failures, the New Testament image of obedience is one of attention and comfort. We can think of God's values as a great oak tree with branches that, if we stand beneath, close to the trunk, we will have received protection from rain and sun. Under those branches we can take a nap and then awaken, look up and attend to the beauty of each leaf. We can listen to the wind rustle through the leaves and recognize what is good and powerful and true. If we choose to leave from beneath the tree we have little protection from the elements and, I would submit, no rest at all. This is the winsome truth that Jesus asks us to teach the world. What a kindness! So today, I invite you to welcome the rest and

protection of obedience to God's ways and the call to share it with others. Make a commitment today to give this gift of kindness to yourself and to at least one other person. Let that be your LARK today.

Prayer: God of grace, we thank you for the protection and rest we find in following your ways. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 55 – The Kindness of Promised Presence - Matthew 28:18-20 *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.*

After Jesus gave his commission to the disciples, they must have felt overwhelmed. Or maybe they were still so clueless that they didn't know enough to feel overwhelmed. Jesus, however, knew what was coming their way. He knew how hard it would be to break through the world's hard shell, the certainties and expectations of life weary people and open up to the truths of hope and grace. He knew that there would be times to come when they felt abandoned, when they would be persecuted and when they would feel like failures. He knew that we would have times like that, too. So before he ascends he reminds them to remember that he *is* (present tense!) with them always, even to the end of time. The word 'remember' in Greek is a powerful one. It literally means to give something flesh again, to make it alive again. It is the word that we use of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in which we don't just recall, but we give flesh again to the whole reality of Christ with us, within us and among us. Jesus knows that sometimes life is hard and that for us to live it in Christ we will need to open ourselves to his constant presence in our lives and world. So today, open your arms wide. Feel the air on your skin. Know that that air is the very breath of God. Close your eyes and see Jesus' face however you imagine it. Hear him say to you, "I'm right here. I'm still right here. I will always be right here." What kindness! Let that be your LARK today.

Prayer: God of Grace, we thank you for your never failing presence. Help us today to awaken to it everywhere. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 56 – The Kindness of the Feeling of Absence – Acts 1:9 – *When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*

Sometimes it is hard to feel the presence of Jesus when we do not see him. The disciples had been through so much, I cannot imagine what their feelings were as they watched Jesus rise to the heavens and disappear. Could they, in the face of that experience, believe that he was somehow mysteriously and spiritually still completely present with them? It took two men (angels) in white robes to remind them that they should stop staring up at the heavens and start their role in spreading heaven on earth. Which is what they did. They elected Matthias to replace Judas and then started together trying to figure out how to get on with their mission. In the history of Christian theology, teachers have suggested that the Ascension was necessary for the Holy Spirit to come in fullness, and that the fullness of the

Spirit is necessary for the accomplishment of our mission, or even to make it through day to day. Why that was necessary is a little murky to me, but the results are not. Having Jesus ascend gives us a great opportunity to walk by faith and not by sight. It is the walking by faith that strengthens the muscles of the heart and soul allowing us to look within at Spirit's work in our hearts and then outward at Spirit's work in the community. So today, take a moment to thank God for the mysteries of the times when God seems out of sight and for the ways it stretches our faith. There is kindness at the heart of even days like that. Today think about how you can walk with faith when confused or the times are dark and you don't know the path you need to take. What do you need in order to get on with your life? Where do you see kindness in your times of confusion or uncertainty? Look a little deeper, it is there just beyond your vision. Give yourself the time you need to reflect today. Let that be your LARK.

Prayer: God of Grace, we thank you for the mysterious grace of the story of your Ascension. Help us to respond as the disciples did and get on with the work you have for us. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 57 – The Kindness of Signs and Wonders – Acts 2:43 – *Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.*

The book of Acts gives us a beautiful, and likely idealized, picture of the lives of the earliest Christians. In today's verse, the Spirit has been received. The indwelling power of the Spirit of Christ has changed Peter completely. No longer is he the bumbling ego driven jealous power seeker. Suddenly he is resplendent and eloquent. His speech helping the gathered crowds understand the first Pentecost has led many people to faith in Christ. In these few verses we get a glimpse into what the daily life of the earliest believers was like. All around them they saw signs and wonders. In the New Testament, the word for sign means a mark or an indication. Signs are pointers to a greater reality. Signs appeal to our understanding. When we see an indication of God, we come to understand God better. Wonders are a little different. Wonders are things that make us marvel. They are often strange and out of the ordinary. Wonders are often understood as supernatural and intended to appeal to our imaginations. Signs help us understand more of God. Wonders help us know how much is beyond our understanding. We can look for signs. Wonders, however, are pure gift. All we can do to receive them is to be humbly open to them. Today, tune your eyes to the signs that are around you that help you see God and learn something about who God is. Also, tell God that you are open to receive wonders if they are needed and God sees fit. What are the signs that faithfully point you toward God? Each one is a Spirit act of kindness. Knowing that, can you think of a kind way today that you could point the way to God for someone else? Maybe you are the sign that someone needs today. Be open to that and let that be your Lark!

Prayer: God of Grace, we thank you for the many signs of your presence with which you bless us. We are grateful for every new insight. We are grateful as well for the moments of wonderment when we realize how much we do not and can never know. Keep us always in Awe of you and make us signs of your grace! In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.



Day 58 – The Kindness of Holding All Things in Common – Acts 2:44-45 – *All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need.*

Today's verse may be one of the most challenging in the New Testament for those of us who live in the United States with a measure of privilege. We have been trained to be ruggedly individualistic. This does not, of course, mean that we have no spirit of oneness and *esprit de corps*, but still we do tend to think of what we have, own, and control as our own. We tend to think that it is all, first and foremost, for our security and enjoyment. Not much could be further from Jesus' and the Bible's, reality than that. Throughout Jesus' teaching, he asks us to unhook from the dangers of possessions and individualism. He tells a rich man to give everything away to the poor. He laments at how hard it is for those with many possessions to enter the kingdom. It is not, of course, possessions that are the real problem. The problem is the way possessions possess us, and therefore the way we cling to their inequitable distribution. It seems from this text that there was a brief shining moment when, as a people of Christ, we understood and lived this truth. We understood that nothing actually belonged to us at all. That everything we had and controlled was given for the good of all and was to be relinquished whenever another was in need. What a picture of unquestioned kindness! That radical form of community, sadly, did not last long even among the early believers who were in constant awe from signs and wonders. Later in Acts we see that Ananias and Saphira try to hedge their bets and falsify their pledge to seem more generous than they actually were. That duplicity killed them both. Granted, for good or ill, we are not likely to form a commune and hold all our goods in common as today's verse describes. Still, there is tremendous kindness in recognizing that all we have belongs to God and is to be used for the good of all. Today, as you go about your daily tasks, notice everything that you have, your clothes, shoes, computer, desk, bed, house, car, just everything. Thank God for each thing you notice and ask how it might be used to meet the needs of others. Perhaps your kitchen can produce a meal for a hungry or hurting neighbor. Perhaps your bed can give you good rest so that you are strengthened to serve others. Perhaps your car can make a run to the grocery for a shut in neighbor. Recognizing that all we have is to be used to serve, has the added benefit of reducing our secret feelings of lack or desiring more than we need. After all, to whom much is given, much is required! Choose one thing that you feel led to share today. Let that be your LARK.

Prayer: God of Grace, we thank you for the realization all we have is gift to be used to serve others on your behalf. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 59 – The Kindness of Worship - Acts 2:46-47 *Day by Day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

This verse gives us a picture of a community basking in the joy of what God has done for them in Christ to such an extent that they are constantly worshipping and praising. They spent much time in Temple worship which included instruction, song and ritual action. Our service for the Lord's Day liturgies are loosely based on the forms of Temple worship at the

time of Jesus. There are rhythms to it, time of rejoicing, times of confessing, time for instruction, times for prayer. The early believers recognized how much they needed this worship. They knew how grateful they were for God and all of the grace they received. They took their worship home with them and ate together with glad hearts. This rhythm of worship and feeding did its transforming work and all around saw the changes in them. Others began to notice that these Christians were not like everybody else. They had a shimmering quality to their common life. They had become people of praise and generosity. Their faith so delighted them that others wanted to share in what they had found. The rhythms of worship, home fellowship, generosity and praise are still transformative. That is, if they become an awakened way of life and not adjuncts to lives filled with too much else. Today practice that rhythm. Take a moment to offer your worship to God. Confess your faults. Receive instruction. Share a meal with someone if you can. Open your heart widely and generously and watch what happens. You will be amazed! There is kindness at the very heart of the rhythms of our lives and worship. Renew your commitment to worship today. Invite someone to join you in the joy. Let that be your LARK today.

Prayer: God of Grace, we thank you for the patterns and rhythms of our lives and faith. Help us today to draw strength for them and to worship you with a glad and generous heart. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Day 60 – The Large Kindness of Small Things – Luke 21:1-4 – *He looked and he saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them, for all of them contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she has to live on.”*

Our sixty-day journey of exploring kindness is at an end. Today's verse reminds us that no act of kindness or generosity is ever too small or insignificant. In this story, Jesus is in the temple for worship. In those days the offering receptacles (big metal objects that looked a bit like a trumpet) were set in the front of the worship space. It was not uncommon for people to gather nearby and listen to the clanging of the coins in the trumpet. Often the rich gained status by how loud, and thus how large, the noise their gifts made. Here Jesus watches a poor widow give everything she has, two tiny coins. Her coins would not have made more than a small clink. She could not give much in quantity but she gave all in quality. I think Jesus was most impressed about the 'all.' Her trust in God was so complete that she held nothing back for herself. Wow. As we think about our journey into kindness, it is fitting to remember that it is not the large actions of kindness that define our faithfulness. Those are amazing miracles of God, without a doubt. Still it is the small daily self-giving choices we make that will make up the larger changes in our hearts, and eventually in our world. Today take a moment to think over these last weeks of LARKS. What small actions did you take to be kind? How has the practice of giving and receiving kindness changed you? Can you identify any shifts in your attention? Can you feel any softening in your heart? Do you find that you are a bit less quick to judge? Can you feel a greater sense of oneness with those around you and the created order? Do you find that you are a little more kind toward yourself and forgiving of others? If so, praise God for this time! You may want to go

back over these devotions, or any that seemed most meaningful to you again and again. The more your commit to the process of kindness, the more miracles you will daily see!

Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you for the miracles of kindness, especially for the small actions we have taken. We thank you for the changes we are experiencing and we offer ourselves to you and ask that you will deepen our kindness! In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

