

Sermon for Zion - March 10, 2019 - Lent 1; Communion

Hymn: Praise the one who breaks the darkness; All in All; 722 – Lord, whose love

Scripture: Micah 6:8; Ephesians 4:21-32 (selected verses); Galatians 5:22-23

Sermon Title: Fruit of the Spirit – Kindness

*Micah 6:6a-8*

*“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? 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?”*

*Ephesians 4:21-32 (selected verses)*

*Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him, throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life... Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.*

*Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry... Use your hands for good hard work, and then give generously to others in need... Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them...*

*Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.*

*Galatians 5:22-23*

*The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!*

I'm back from Israel, where for twelve days I, and a group of 29 pilgrims, wound and walked our way over the green hills and shorelines of Galilee, the breathtaking canyons of Petra, the sandstorms of the Jordanian desert, the salty waters of the Dead Sea, the nativity grottos of Bethlehem. We ascended the hills of Jerusalem, stood on the Temple stairs where Jesus taught, sat by the pools where he healed the blind and lame, sang in the churches which marked the Jerusalem events of his final days. We prayed in the garden, we knelt at Calvary, we entered the very tomb where he would lay for three long days, to emerge resurrected, the living Son of the living God.

I could go on with all that we saw, felt, heard, tasted, experienced. But this morning, I need to focus on a single moment, a single place. It is a stop on the Via Dolorosa, the Stations of the Cross, which marks the painful path along which Jesus stumbled so long ago, from the condemnation to the crucifixion itself. And to understand the story, to allow it to speak its message to our hearts, we need to trace our steps down the stone stairs, the crowded streets, the calling merchants, the chaos and bustle of a crowded Jerusalem market, to where it all begins, Pilate's seat of judgement, Station Number One. It is there you start the long walk - station two, where Jesus receives the cross; station three, where the road meets the busy market intersection, and Jesus stumbles, falls; station four, where Jesus meets his devastated, weeping mother; station five, where the passerby, Simon of Cyrene, is compelled to carry the cross; and finally, our goal this morning, up the steep stone stairs, to the easily missed Station Six, marked by a tiny ancient pillar - and that is where, this morning, we'll briefly stop. It is known as The Station of Veronica, and it tells a story that you won't find in the Bible, but which is important to us today.

Put yourself in the story - place yourself on that very street, so long ago. It is the Day of Preparation for Passover, the city is jammed with pilgrims, shopkeepers are selling the shelves bare, when you are shoved roughly aside by a muscled Roman arm, you are pressed against a stone wall, a soldier is snarling "Clear a path! Clear a path or you're next!" A frightened man, moments before a simple passer-by, is stumbling awkwardly under the weight of a cross, and behind him, staggering, half-crawling, one foot somehow following the other, is another man, a bloody, beaten wreck of a man, robe red with his blood, a crown of thorns cruel upon his brow.

You shrink back further into the stone, repulsed at the sight, relieved it isn't you. The soldiers are moving the whole horrible parade forward with their brutal efficiency, and many a bystander receives a curse, many others a blow. When this happens:

From out of the crowds pressed against the walls of the street, a young woman suddenly darts into the middle of it all, somehow avoiding a soldier's backhand. She quickly kneels in front of the beaten man and, removing the white linen scarf from her head, wipes his bloody face, wipes the stinging sweat from his eyes, the spittle from his cheek. For a moment, he looks human again, locks eyes with the young woman, and through torn beard and broken teeth mouths a word of thanks. But before she can reply, rough hands grab her shoulders and cast her to the ground, and the moment is over, the grim procession forcing their way forward, the momentary act of

kindness - of reckless, courageous compassion - the last the beaten man would know that day - is at an end. People, still shaken by the grim procession, shake their heads and resume their business, trying to put it out of their minds. Their day moves forward. Their lives move on.

But you look to the edge of the street, where at the base of a small pillar, the young woman cries, holding her arm where the soldier so roughly grabbed. She manages to stand, wiping her eyes with her sleeve, brushing the dirt off her knees. She is about to rub the grit from her hands with the same linen headscarf she used on the beaten man's face, when she looks more closely at it, and her eyes grow wide, her jaw drops in astonishment. She clutches the cloth to her breast, turns, and is gone from your sight, absorbed into the crowd from which she came. And you turn, too, and rejoin the busy shoppers. Your day moves on. It is the Day of Preparation. There is much to do.

That's the moment, remembered at a worn Roman pillar, there on the Via Dolorosa, there at Station Six, the story of a young woman and a white linen headscarf. It could be a moment forgotten, but somehow it is remembered, somehow the story lives on. For, in an unlikely piece of tradition, in a remarkable miracle you won't find in Scripture, that cloth which wiped the face of Jesus is said to have somehow borne his image; that on that cloth, in blood and sweat and tears, was imprinted the very face of Christ.

It is said to have had miraculous powers of healing, that cloth; that to touch it, somehow, was akin to touching Christ. It is not a story which fits well with us practical Presbyterians; it carries, I confess more than a faint whiff of wishful thinking to my cynical, sceptical mind. But put the cloth respectfully, for a moment, aside; it is not my focus in any case. I want to draw your attention back to the young woman.

If you look at the ancient pillar which marks the spot, you'll find her name, carved in neat Latin script - Veronica. It isn't a Hebrew name, and is almost certainly not the young woman's actual name. It isn't, or wasn't, a proper name at all. It is instead a compound Latin / Greek word - Vera Icon. Vera means "true." Icon means "image." Veronica. The True Image. At first, it was the name tradition ascribed to the cloth. Before long, the name was given to the otherwise anonymous young woman - Veronica, upon whose cloth was miraculously captured the true image of Christ.

Which is how it should be, because for me, it is not the cloth which bears the image of Christ. It is, instead, the young woman. For in choosing to act in a moment of compassion, in choosing to help when others hurt, in reaching out in a simple act of kindness, Veronica herself became the true image of Christ.

The Apostle Paul, who himself knew something about cloths with healing powers (*“God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured”* - Acts 19:11-12 - how did that get in our Bible?), knew how important kindness was in establishing a Christian community – knew the centrality of kindness in being the kind of Church which is itself a reflection of Christ. *“Love is patient,”* he famously writes; *“love is kind”* (1 Corinthians 13:4). *“Be kind and compassionate to one another,”* he instructs the Ephesians, *“forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you”* (Ephesians 4:31). And he reminds Timothy that, *“the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone”* (2 Timothy 2:24). I could go on. Paul certainly does, again and again, imploring God’s people to be kind.

Because, like Veronica, when we are kind - and remember, kindness is an attitude of compassion revealed by what we actually do - when we are kind, when we “do kindness,” we resemble Christ. We become the true image of Jesus. *“When the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy,”* Paul writes Titus (3:4-5). *“When the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared.”* What better description of Jesus - the very embodiment of kindness and divine love. What better way for us, the followers of Jesus, to bear his image to the world.

And so when Paul speaks of the Fruit of the Spirit, it is kindness of which he speaks, the kindness through which Christ is revealed in us and to the world through us, as we bear his image - his true image - through our actions of kindness and selfless deeds of love. Vera Icon – Veronica - that’s you. That’s me. That’s our name now.

And now we share communion, through which Christ is once more revealed in the gathering of God’s people, the celebration of God’s presence, the declaration of God’s word, and the sharing of these simple elements which Christ shared with us, and which we now share with one another in kindness and in love. Amen.