

Sermon for September 9, 2007 – Acts of Random Kindness

Genesis 6: 9-22

Matthew 25: 31 – 26:2

There was a bumper sticker around a few years ago, that may still be around, for all I know. It reads, “Commit senseless acts of random kindness.” This saying ties in with the positive side of chaos theory. In a nutshell, chaos theory says that infinitesimal changes in one small area of the world can cause massive changes in other, distant parts of the world. In 1961, Edward Lorenz, a meteorologist, had been working on theoretical models about how tropical storms, typhoons and hurricanes develop. He ran a projection based on data he had. The first time he ran the data, one of the numbers in the sequence was .506127. When he ran the data again, to save paper, he input .506 – leaving off the 127 millionth part of the number – and the forecast markedly changed. An infinitesimal change in the initial conditions changed the entire projection. Many times people refer to this as the “butterfly effect.” The eddy of current a butterfly wing makes can change the weather on the other side of the globe, because of the impact of that small current on the air around it, and its impact on the air around THAT, and so on. Of course, if a butterfly fluttering by can add to a hurricane, more butterflies fluttering by can change the course of that hurricane entirely. In the same way, initial conditions of acts of kindness can also cause small changes that ripple out, and eventually change the world.

Acts of NOT SO random kindness is what we will be considering this fall season. Christians would argue that there is no such thing as random kindness, because God uses all of our behavior to work His grace in the world. Our behavior may look random to an on-looker – it may even look random to us, until we have the chance over time to gain some perspective, and see what God is doing, and how God is using us in the lives of others.

God calls us to do thing that can look random to other folks. Just imagine how random it looked to the folks who lived near Noah when he started to build that ark. Noah could have ignored that call from God – talk about an act of apparent randomness! – but he chose to respond. And it was that act of response that saved the world. Whether you prefer to consider this story to be literally true, or a parable, either way the conclusion is the same – Noah’s obedience, his willingness to follow a call from God that looked random, if not totally nuts, to the folks around him did save the world.

One of the things Jesus did was to encourage those around Him to commit what can appear to be random acts of kindness. The parable of the good Samaritan is one – how much more random could it have been to those folks Jesus was talking to than for a SAMARITAN to help an injured Jew? But the Samaritan recognized their common humanity, and acted accordingly. In today’s passage from Matthew, Jesus holds up and contrasts two different groups of people. The first group, those who helped others by feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing those who needed clothing, and visiting those who were imprisoned, were commended by Jesus. Jesus claimed that service for Himself. When they protested that they hadn’t helped HIM, Jesus replied that when they had cared for even the least of folk, they cared for Him. The second group, who did none of those things, were condemned by Jesus, who treated their lack of care for others as though it was a lack of care for Him. You can sense the confusion of this second group – But Jesus, when did we not care for YOU?

His response: by not caring for others, you are not caring for Me. Jesus doesn't give anyone brownie points for serving Him directly – it's all about serving others BECAUSE of our relationship with Him.

Because we are called to serve one another, not for credit and thanks here on earth, but for the glory of God, we are going to be taking a two-pronged approach to this. We are asking the children, and now the wider congregation, to actively try to do one single act of random-appearing kindness a day – anonymously and/or to strangers if possible. Those things could include: allowing someone to merge in that needs to. Invite the new co-worker or lost-looking student to sit with you at lunch. If there are towels in the restroom and water all over the sink, wipe it up. Bring in your neighbor's trash can – but anonymously. Hold the door for folks without expecting thanks. Let someone with fewer groceries go in front of you at the checkout. Clean out closets in preparation for our clothing drive. Give blood. Write a letter to a supervisor about someone's great work. If someone drops their stuff, help them pick it up. You get the idea – all of us, regardless of our ages, can think of small kind things to do for others. Anonymous is good, and helping people we don't really know is also good. But known or not, anonymous or not, do them in the name of Jesus. And we are asking you to write down one single act of random-appearing kindness a day that you experience. Notice them, and receive them with gratitude toward Jesus and the person He is using here on earth to do His will. On Sunday mornings we are going to accumulate those acts of kindnesses we have received, and put them up on the walls of Fellowship Hall. If you need sticky notes, we'll make them available. As the weeks go by, I want to encourage you to keep up this little discipline. When we celebrate Consecration Sunday, we are going to give thanks for all of those not-so random acts of kindness we have experienced, because we'll be able to see God's fingerprints in them. Watch for the impact that your acts of random kindness have on others.

Acts of kindness done in gratitude to God because of His saving grace – those have nothing at all to do with randomness, and everything to do with our relationship with God. So let's continue to deepen it, as we act in Jesus' strong name, until He comes again. And even so, come soon, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Genesis 6: 9-22

These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks. For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them." Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

Matthew 25: 31 – 26:2

Jesus said, "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and He will put the sheep at His right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at His right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you gave Me clothing, I was sick and you took care of Me, I was in prison and you visited Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw You hungry and gave You food, or thirsty and gave You something to drink? And when was it that we saw You a stranger and welcomed You, or naked and gave You clothing? And when was it that we saw You sick or in prison and visited You?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of My family, you did it to Me.' Then He will say to those at His left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from Me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave Me no food, I was thirsty and you gave Me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me, naked and you did not give Me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of You?' Then He will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, He said to His disciples, “You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.”