



This sermon is modified from the original preached by Rev. Adam Hamilton, senior pastor at Resurrection, a United Methodist Church, on October 9, 2022 as part of a series called "What God Requires." This series was part of the church's 2022 Kindness Campaign with the theme "BE: Just, Kind, Humble," based on the Micah 6:8 You can view this and other sermons in the series [here](#). Links to video illustrations are included.

The Power of Kindness

The 2022 Kindness Campaign was called the BE Campaign. Like "Do Unto Others," it was aimed at helping us reduce America's political polarization by reminding us of essential passages of Scripture that all people of faith, liberal or conservative, right or left, Democrats, Republicans and Independents, can and should agree on. You may recall that campaign focused on Micah 6:8. Say this verse with me:

**What does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?**

Someone asked, "If we believe the other party is wrong about some really critical issues, are we simply to be nice and not address these serious differences?" No—we should stand up for what we believe in. But too often we do that with rancor, in a way that merely pushes people away from what we believe. That only further polarizes us. Micah 6:8 offers us a better way.

Today we'll focus on kindness, and how it might just be the key to saving American democracy. We find one model for this in the relationship between Senator Orrin Hatch, conservative Republican from Utah, and Senator Ted Kennedy, liberal Democrat from Massachusetts. These two were often adversaries in the Senate but cared for one another as friends. Shortly after Kennedy's death in 2009, Hatch noted, "I have to say that we became very dear friends. That doesn't mean we didn't fight each other. We fought each other like tooth and tongue but afterwards, we'd put our arms around each other and laugh about it... and we passed a lot of very important legislation together, and I will greatly miss him."¹ When Hatch died in 2022, he was the longest serving senator in American history.

[Photo: An internet search will provide numerous photos of Hatch and Kennedy that may be used for a non-commercial, live sermon illustration]

¹<https://www.businessinsider.com/nine-famous-political-friendships-transcend-party-lines-2018-11#senator-orrin-hatch-and-senator-ted-kennedy-6>

I. The Meaning of HeseD

Kennedy and Hatch both fought for justice as they understood it. Their understandings of what justice looked like, and the proper role of government in how to achieve it were at odds with one another, at times. Yet even in fighting for justice, their fight was tempered by kindness.

The Hebrew word for justice was mishpat. Say it with me: **MISHPAT**. But with it, we also need to learn the Hebrew word for kindness, hesed. Say that with me: **HESED**.

The word hesed appears 250 times in the Hebrew Bible, pointing to its critical importance for the Bible and the Jewish faith. Like the New Testament Greek word **AGAPE**, it is so important in the Bible, and with such varied nuances, that it is impossible to capture the full depth of its meaning with a single word.

Hesed includes a concern for another person, and in this sense it is sometimes translated as **COMPASSION**. It is a commitment to provide care or help for another person, and in this sense it is sometimes translated as **KINDNESS**. It is at times providing aid to someone who has no right to expect this kindness from you, and in that sense it is **MERCY**. And there are times it expresses a deep commitment to and relationship with another person, and in this sense it is often translated as **STEADFAST LOVE** or **LOYALTY**. In this last sense, a husband and wife can show hesed to each other. Friends are meant to show hesed – steadfast love – to each other. Steadfast love is a primary attribute of God’s character and relationship to humanity. It is with reference to God’s care for humankind that we find the word most often appear in Scripture. In the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, 174 of the 250 times hesed is used are translated as steadfast love.

What God demonstrates towards us—compassion, kindness, help, mercy, loyalty and steadfast love—is what we’re meant do for others. This was why Micah said that the LORD **requires** *mishpat* and hesed of us.

At a wedding I tell couples, “This is what you are signing on for—compassion, kindness, mercy, and steadfast love.” It is not just a feeling, and often it is not a feeling at all. It is an orientation towards others, a dogged determination to help, care for and bless them. This is how we’re meant to live our lives towards all others, not only spouses. It is how God cares for you, and how you are called to care for one another. It is how we are to live towards our fellow human beings. This is what Orin Hatch and Ted Kennedy shared in their relationship.

II. The Power of Kindness

Let’s consider for a moment the power of kindness as we practice it. Dr. Michelle Robin is a wellness coach and founder of the 31-day Kindness Campaign. She told us that nearly all of the research on the power of kindness shows that the one practicing it is happier, has less stress, better relationships, is more successful in business, their marriages are happier, and they live longer.

Amy Weaver, President and CFO of Salesforce, one of the 100 largest companies in the world, noted that one of the top three strategies at Salesforce is “leading with kindness.” She said, “When thinking about how to run a company and manage people, we don’t talk nearly enough about the power of kindness. Leading with kindness is a strength that should be cultivated and encouraged, not a weakness.”

The writers of Proverbs captured the benefits of kindness. “**KINDNESS and faithfulness protect the king; he supports his throne by KINDNESS**” (Proverbs 20:28). The Hebrew wisdom sages knew it was not primarily a strong army that protected the king, but kindness that sustained the ruler. Proverbs 21:21 noted, “**Those who pursue righteousness and KINDNESS will find life, righteousness, and honor.**” Not just a king—all who pursue kindness find life, right standing and honor. In both verses, the word “kindness” is hesed.

I think about business leaders in our congregation, and how many of them are defined by kindness,

mercy, and compassion. I was speaking with one of our car dealers several years ago, and he spoke of wanting to run his company as a Christian leader. Among the things he's done is to try to show mercy, compassion and kindness to his employees, but also to invite them to join him in caring for our community. In the last several years, he and his employees have given \$7 million dollars to provide food for hungry people in Kansas City. He's been doing well in business by doing good.

What's not surprising about this is that his kindness, compassion and mercy have cultivated a loyal and long-serving staff and a loyal customer base. By serving the community he's cultivated a sense of meaning and purpose for his employees beyond just serving their customers.

I see this in many people. This does not preclude holding people accountable, seeking to make a profit, and or having business goals. But among those goals is practicing kindness.

Have you noticed how much nicer it is to do business with someone who is kind? Whether flight attendants, wait staff at a restaurant, schoolteachers, or doctors or nurses, kindness makes a huge difference. The same is true on the other side. When a wait person gets to serve a kind and generous person, it helps compensate for every unkind person they have seen that day.

III. The Daily Mission of Kindness

What would happen if you saw living and spreading kindness as part of your mission each day, your purpose in life? If each day you began the day praying that God might use you to spread kindness, to show mercy, to reflect compassion?

One of our pastors went to the CVS Pharmacy in 2022 to get the latest COVID booster shot. While there he saw how hard these folks were working. He watched the pharmacist working the drive through, the front desk, preparing prescriptions and giving shots. After giving a big thank you, he had a thought: "I want to bless these folks in some way. What could I do?" He decided to write each of the 11 employees a thank you note, and went to Viva Tacos next door to buy a \$20 gift card for each employee. I happened to be in the pharmacy picking up some things when he delivered the thank you notes to the manager and took one personally to the pharmacist. He left, without them knowing what they were, but I asked, "What were you up to?" That was when I heard the story. I saw him later and he said, "That was the best \$220 I spent in a long time. I hoped to spread kindness, but what I found in doing it was joy!" He also wrote the thank you notes on church letter head to be a witness to Christ and the church.

You may not need to buy someone a \$20 lunch to spread kindness, but you do have to be intentional about thinking, "How can I bless, care for, lift up or show mercy to someone else?"

After a devastating hurricane hit Florida, I spoke with Bishop Ken Carter. He was bishop to about 600 United Methodist Churches in Florida. He sent me this information in an e-mail:

We estimate at least 150 of our churches are damaged by the hurricane. This is 1/4 of our number. The pastors we've met with have lost their homes through flooding, are experiencing trauma from this and memories of previous storms, are trying to locate their members as good shepherds... Some of the churches are anchors for their communities in providing water, food, tarps, etc. And many of our strongest churches are sources of life and hope.

A couple of days later he sent me another note with the names of five churches he hoped we might

help with. Beyond the specifics of that hurricane, *hesed* looks in part like sharing, in the wake of disasters, whatever level of funds we can to support ministries and programs, including immediate aid distributed by these churches as people seek to put their lives back together.

Princeton Professor of Old Testament Katherine Doob Sakenfeld notes that one definition of *hesed* in the Bible is:

Where one person is in significant need of help from the other, help that typically may go beyond the usual expectations of such a relationship, and help that often is essential to the basic well-being or even the survival of the needy person. ²

² *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* article on *hesed*

IV. *Hesed* and Politics

This leads to a final word about how *hesed*—kindness, compassion, and mercy—might just be the critical answer to our polarization and divisions. It won't instantly solve our differences. At times, our differences are our strength—they are meant to make us better, stronger, smarter and coming up with better solutions. *We should have vigorous debate about our challenges and problems*, with two or more sides working to come up with our best assessment of the challenges and problems we face, and the best solutions to address these. The debate in politics is intended to be constructive, but that often requires compromise, and always must have the best interests of our country at heart and not just of "our" side.

Debate is needed in our pursuit of what is just or right. Neither party will have all the right answers, but we are meant to work together, compromising at points, negotiating and coming up with the common good. And that is what Americans, by and large, are craving from their politicians—to work together to come up with the best answers. But that work is only possible if our politicians are seeking to be just, kind and humble.

A poll released on September 27, 2022 found that 75% of Americans, both conservatives and liberals (and everyone in between) who were surveyed agreed with this statement: **"To restore peace and unity we need leaders to model kindness and understanding, even with people they strongly disagree with. Leaders must show the way forward."** ³

³ https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/CRC_Americas-Values-Study_O2.pdf (This was actually two polls surveying 3,775.)

But waiting for our leaders to "model kindness and understanding with people they disagree" may not happen if "we the people," the people who elect them, are not willing to do this first. Maybe they need us to model it for them. I am reminded of the 1955 song, "Let There Be Peace on Earth, and Let it Begin with Me."

Listen—kindness changes things. It is the key to moving away from hyper polarization and to a healthy democracy. Kindness is nearly irresistible.

I was a junior in high school at Blue Valley when Ronald Reagan was elected president, and a sophomore in college at the end of his term. During the first six years of Reagan's presidency, the Speaker of the House was Tip O'Neil. Reagan was a Republican, O'Neil was a Democrat. O'Neil served

34 years in the House of Representatives, from 1953 to 1987. These men were in many ways political opposites, particularly on domestic policy. They could be tough negotiators and ardent adversaries when it came to politics, but they were also friends.

Several months after Reagan assumed office, he was shot by John Hinkley. Reagan aid Max Friedersdorf was in the hospital room when Tip O'Neil came to visit—one of the first people Reagan allowed to visit him. He was in bad shape, but as O'Neil entered the room, the President lit up. O'Neil walked to his bedside and took Reagan's hands in his hands. Reagan gave O'Neil a big smile and said, "Thanks for coming, Tip." Friedersdorf recounts, "Still holding one of the president's hands, the speaker got down on his knees and said he would like to offer a prayer for the president, choosing the 23rd Psalm."⁴

⁴ <https://www.politico.com/story/2013/09/chris-matthews-book-tip-and-the-gipper-when-politics-worked-097585>

Five years later, O'Neil (who had already announced his retirement from Congress) was being honored at a dinner at the Washington Hilton. He invited President Reagan to speak at this dinner. I listened to that speech this week, and thought you might enjoy hearing an excerpt from it as it demonstrates how two people might be fierce adversaries, critics of one another and their ideas, who would also work together to support common solutions, and at the same time, demonstrate hesed. Take a listen.⁵

[VIDEO: Regan's speech honoring O'Neil, March 17, 1986]

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3w_rsGmPAw

This is what it looks like to engage in good politics—to stand up for what you believe is just and right, to fight for it, while treating your opponent with kindness, grace and mercy. If Reagan and O'Neil could do it, what reason could we possibly have for not doing the same?

What does the LORD require of you? **To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.**