"Being Kind"
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
February 11, 2018

Today's service came together somewhat serendipitously. Firstly, Kate and I realized that tomorrow is Darwin's birthday and today would be a great day for Ken to share his story about Darwin. Thank you, Ken! Secondly, I had scheduled today to be our sermon on our monthly theme of kindness. And *then* I asked myself—what does Darwin have to do with kindness?! Isn't Darwin's theory of evolution all about "survival of the fittest" and fierce competition?! I began to panic.

Except it turns out that Darwin *did* believe that emotions such as kindness and compassion were not only part of human nature, but important for our survival. In an article, "Survival of the Kindest," researcher and author Line Goguen-Hughes discusses Darwin's 1871 book, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex.* Goguen-Hughes recounts a story that Darwin tells about an example of an animal expressing kindness to another animal. Darwin writes,

> "Several years ago a keeper at the Zoological Gardens showed me some deep and scarcely healed wounds on the nape of his own neck, inflicted on him whilst kneeling on the floor, by a fierce baboon. The little American monkey who was a warm friend of this keeper, lived in the same compartment, and was dreadfully afraid of the great baboon. Nevertheless, as soon as he saw his friend in peril, he rushed to the rescue, and by screams and bites so distracted the baboon that the man was able to escape."

What jumps out in this story is how the monkey expresses concern for *and kindness to* a being who was not in his family...not even in his species.

Is kindness a part of our human nature? Darwin seemed to think that as a species we have the capacity—and that our mammalian ancestors do too. Emotions of compassion and sympathy for others support the survival of our family. Yet, these emotions need not be limited to our kin. Darwin wrote,

> "As man [*sic*] advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races. [If

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> they appear different] experience unfortunately shews us how long it is before we look at them as our fellow creatures. Sympathy beyond the confines of man, that is humanity to the lower animals, seems to be one of the latest moral acquisitions… This virtue [concern for lower animals], one of the noblest with which man is endowed, seems to arise incidentally from our sympathies becoming more tender and more widely diffused, until they extend to all sentient beings."

If this expanding sense of sympathy to ever-widening circles sounds a bit like the Buddhist lovingkindness meditation, then you're not alone in thinking this. Goguen-Hughes explores this connection in her article. In fact, in a meeting with the Dalai Lama she shared Darwin's quote. His translator, Thupten Jinpa, asked, "Did he use that phrase 'all sentient beings'?" Jinpa explained that this is "the exact English translation of the Buddhist description of the all-encompassing compassion of a bodhisattva." There's even some evidence that Darwin may have been familiar with Buddhist teachings prior to writing his book.

I love this interplay of Darwin and Buddhism. On the one hand, Darwin's writings explore our deeply wired *nature* as social and emotional animals. He muses about how far our capacity for sympathy—for kindness to others—might expand to include ever more persons and beings. While pointing to the possibility of growth—of evolution, Darwin is also naming something he sees as *innate* in our species. And, on the other hand, Buddhism calls people onto a path to intentionally cultivate themselves to become a certain way. Buddhism calls people into specific practices such as lovingkindness meditation in order to develop more lovingkindness in our actions and ultimately in our very being.

What strikes me here is that there is a tension between the sense of "who we *are*" and "the actions we *do*"–between what we might call "nature" and "nurture." This makes me wonder . . . is kindness something we *are* or something we *do*? Are we simply born with a certain capacity that determines how kind we are? Or, can we actively strive to be kinder people? Or, is it both . . . that we have a capacity for kindness that we can deepen and expand through intentional choices and practices?

The sermon title gestures to this tension. Is *being kind* a set of actions we choose to take? Or, what might it mean to simply *be* kind . . . to be a kind be-ing?

As I reflected on kindness this week, I realized that the bar for being kind isn't simply not being a jerk. Kindness is more than just not harming someone. Nor is kindness being neutral. Kindness is not indifference. (Although it may be kind in a crowded subway to be intentionally indifferent to the crush of bodies, not all of which may be pleasant to be so near to...) Kindness is active. Kindness comes out clearly on the side of wishing another

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well. Kindness sees another person as a person like oneself: a person with hopes and disappointments; a person who gets tired or overwhelmed; a person who may appreciate the warmth and help of another person.

In her poem "Kindness," Naomi Shihab Nye explores the journey of becoming kind. She shows how kindness draws upon a capacity to see and feel the imagined experience of another. Kindness emerges through experiences of loss and heartache. She writes,

> *Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,*
> *you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho*
> *lies dead by the side of the road.*
> *You must see how this could be you,*
> *how he too was someone*
> *who journeyed through the night with plans*
> *and the simple breath that kept him alive*.

This could be you. This could be you fleeing the violence of wars in search of safety for your family. This could be you unable to find work that covers the bills. This could be you spit upon for the color of your skin, the person you love, the gender identity that differs from that assigned at birth. Or, this could be you driving distractedly because you just learned about the cancer diagnosis. This could be you in line for groceries while suffering, heart broken, or simply having a bad day.

Loss can teach us to see differently. To see the vulnerability of life, the sheer improbability of life—that we were born to this time and place and not to another; that we could have been other; that we are not alone in the fragile journey of living, loving, and grieving.

Being kind is the response to seeing all of this. Being kind is recognizing the fragile wonder of a life in its fears and hopes. Being kind is wishing another being well. *May you be healthy and safe. May you be happy. May you be well.*

But it's not always easy to be kind. People can be jerks. They can be rude and even cruel. It's hard to be kind to someone who is harming you or one you love. Are we really supposed to be kind to white supremacists? To ____[name your enemy of choice]____?

Think again of Darwin's monkey story. Kindness and sympathy are a matter of perspective and choice. From the point of view of the zookeeper, the monkey showed enormous kindness by risking its own safety to protect the zookeeper. Yet, from the point of view of

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the baboon, you might say that the monkey very unkindly interrupted its attack. The monkey made a choice to protect the life and wellbeing of the zookeeper.
We too must choose to whom we will be kind. Will we be kind only to our kin—to those who are like us, who like us? Or, will we seek to also be kind to the strangers who cross our paths—to the masses of "neutral" persons who might so easily be treated with indifference rather than kindness? And, will we be kind to our enemies, to those who have harmed us? . . . What happens when we wish them well in our minds? When we dare to see that they too are "*someone who journey[s] through the night with plans and the simple breath that ke[eps them] alive*"?

These are not simple questions. What I do know is that kindness cannot be reduced to niceness and polite smiles that disregard real harm. I can wish my enemies well because I see their humanity. At the same time, like the monkey, sometimes kindness may be choosing to aggressively intervene to protect someone from harm, especially one I care about. We have to choose for whom and for what we will fight. But, I wonder if there isn't a way to both struggle for what is good and still treat those with whom we disagree with lovingkindness? To wish them well even as we resolutely disagree?

And, there is a lot of strongly held disagreement in our world. With so much fierce conflict, what would it be like if there was more kindness in our world? Over a year ago, a mom in Madison, Wisconsin made a handwritten sign for a protest that read:

> In this house we believe:
> Black Lives Matter
> Women's Rights are Human Rights
> No Human is Illegal
> Science is Real
> Love is Love
> Kindness is Everything

Kindness is everything. To whom will we be kind? Science suggests it is in our nature to be cooperative, sympathetic, and kind. But how wide of a circle will we draw? Darwin and Buddhism suggest that the circle can become ever wider . . . eventually encompassing all beings. Perhaps that's not where we are at today. But, perhaps it is something worth striving for.

So may it be.
Amen.

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