

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of all, today we remember. We remember why we come to your house. We come to learn, to come together, to worship our God. We praise you, source of all things good. We seek to live in Christ's example and to live with purpose, to live well in this complicated world. As we look to you, Holy God, we remember our priorities. We remember the image of Christ, who called us to love one another, even our enemies, with a love that transforms. We remember we are called to live lives that exemplify you through our worship and our care for our neighbors. As we come to you, we lay down the burdens of care and worry on our hearts that we may move forward with joyfulness and song. Hear all that we carry and guide us to fullness, holy God.

Gracious God, give us the courage to live well, to live lovingly, to live honestly and openly with our brothers and sisters. The world gives us examples of caring that are just skin deep, but we long for better. We long for more than the ordinary, more than lukewarm, more than the mediocre. We want to truly be your people: people of honesty, people of mutual accountability, people that shine with God's love. Help us, God, to live lovingly, not just living to be "nice." We pray all these things in the name of the Lord of Love and Care, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together as one people...

SERMON

One thing that annoys me the most is the fly-by check in. Unfortunately, none of us is immune; I find myself doing the thing that I hate more often than I'd like. We all know how it goes. You see someone you know and yell out "Hey, how are you doing?" as you go walking by. Nevermind what the answer is. You expect the same ol, same ol, "Things are fine" or "Things are great!" You answer with a "good" or "fine." It's not just expected; it

seems there's an unspoken rule that you have to answer that way. But sometimes, someone might take the opportunity to say what's REALLY going on, like "Hey, how are you doing?" "Well, life's going pretty badly." "That's great! Good to hear!" And off you go. We don't prepare for a real response like that, and that's a problem when others need a friendly ear. Then there's the dreaded circular greeting. Someone greets you with, "Hi! How are you doing?" You respond, "I'm doing great; How are you doing?" and they respond, "I'm fine, how are you doing?" when you've already taken the time to tell them how you are doing. The vicious circle can go on and on unless they catch themselves in it. You just KNOW that they have their complete and undivided attention on you. These are considered friendly discussions, but they aren't meaningful. They fulfill the proper etiquette of greeting, but there is no real sense of care here. In fact, one can easily see they are skin deep. In other words, these are, by definition, "nice."

"Nice" is a good way to describe these things. It's a good thing to be "nice," right? Nice is good. Nice is friendly. Nice is caring. Nice is, well, just...nice. Isn't that nice? Well, no. The "nice" we are talking about is not any of those things. In fact, I don't like nice. Our lives as Christians are devoted to growing and going deeper, with ourselves and one another. In that vein of growing in connection with one another, nice is not love in disguise; it is a disguise of love, and Jesus agrees. It's surface layer relating with one another. We are called to grow with one another, and that calls us to keep going deeper. God calls us to something deeper than "nice," to something more fulfilling; God calls us to transformative love. Let me tell you about "nice" and we'll see why "nice" is the enemy, yes, the sworn and absolute evil enemy of Christianity.

We tell children, "Be nice." Don't be mean. Just be nice. We hesitate to tell another person what we really think about something because it might hurt their feelings, and, well, "that's just not nice." We don't want to hurt each other's feelings. No question, that's good etiquette. That's what we are taught to do to be seen as good and upright citizens. I think nice is made out to be something it is not. When we are called to grow in deeper relationship with each other, nice stays on the surface layer. Nice isn't love. Nice is about staying on the surface instead of growing in love and care for one another. It's bad treatment dressed up like love. Nice covers up real feelings in favor of looking friendly and just staying on the surface. It hurts the giver and the receiver of a message. "Nice" gives someone a compliment one moment then turns to another person to start gossiping about them. That's "nice" because you didn't hurt them to their face. But that's not honest. Another way of thinking about it is that "nice" is the perfect way to describe the mediocre road. When something is really exciting, you don't describe it as "nice." For example, "I won the lottery. Well, that's just nice." You can think of better ways to say it. Then again, when something is really bad, you don't use "nice." Nice is the place in-between. Nice is neither good or bad...it's just ordinary. Nice is lukewarm. Have you ever had a lukewarm drink or a lukewarm meal? You either want a hot drink or a cold drink. Anything in between is not appealing; in fact, it can be really disgusting. Either be hot or cold...not lukewarm. Some think that to be loving is to be nice. That's just not true. Ya know what? I hate nice. I know I sound like a Grumpy Gus, but stick with me here. Good etiquette's purpose is to maintain an image, but we aren't here to learn about good etiquette. We are here to worship God and learn how to live in the footsteps of Jesus. And Jesus wasn't nice.

Jesus cared about loving one another, not about not hurting another person's feelings when there was transformation to be had.

Jesus was real. Jesus was honest. Jesus wanted to grow in relationship with the people. Those who met him obviously knew this, so they flocked to him. They knew that Jesus would not tell them what they wanted to hear if they deserved otherwise. Jesus loved them all. No matter whether you were considered small in the grand scheme of things or you were a temple authority, Jesus treated all equally. If you look at our scripture lesson again, Jesus reams the Pharisees because they were not doing the same thing; they were living the ideals of "nice." "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence." "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." Jesus calls out the Pharisees because they treated people one way in one situation then treated them differently in another. Another name for "nice" is "hypocrisy," and Jesus saw the Pharisee's guilt. On the outside, they look like holy people. They do all that is right by the law. They treat one another nicely. But Jesus saw beyond the surface. There was no deep loving nature there. On the other hand, they worked against the people's well being by being in cahoots with the Romans who oppressed the faithful Jews. The Pharisees taught the people how to live faithfully on one hand, while with the other, worked with those who continued to oppress them day after day for their own profit. They lived lives of hypocrisy and self-gain. They lived lives that were "nice."

I can imagine many of you still sitting here and thinking, “But I don’t want to be bad; I want to be nice.” Make no mistake, there is a strong difference between bad and nice. “Nice” is not the opposite of bad. Nice is the non-committal position between loving and negativity. It’s like candy; it tastes good at the time, but it’s full of empty calories. That means a lot in these days right after Halloween. We come here because we want to be loved, and we want to know that everyone around truly loves us. You know you’ve been the victim of the kind of “nice” I’m talking about, and when you do, it really hurts. I’m sure many of us have had the same experience. Think of a time when you asked another person for an honest opinion about something you were working on or something you did because you really wanted to know where you stood. Perhaps they told you that you were doing really good, and it makes you feel good. However you find out later that they weren’t fully honest with you. That takes a bite out of you. It hurts you deeply, because what you valued is not what they valued. You wanted honest feedback; they were more interested in being nice. Nice cuts deeply because it’s not real; it mimics real in a way that can hurt us deeply.

Let’s look again at Jesus. Jesus hated the idea of “nice.” He critiqued the Pharisees because they favored the “nice” way of outward piety and an inward lack of love. Instead, Jesus gave the people what they really needed to become more faithful, nurturing them into fullness. In other words, Jesus loved. We have the words of another scripture that lifts a different ideal. 1 Corinthians 13 is a beloved scripture. It is the most detailed description of love in the entire bible. We see it most often at weddings, but that’s not the main place where we should be talking about it. We should be talking about its ideal weekly in the House of God. Its ideal is love: the way of God. Loving is about the same thing inside and out; loving is authentic, as opposed to the one thing on the outside and another on the

inside of hypocrisy. “Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.” Love calls us to honesty, to call our neighbors to accountability and being willing to be called to accountability when our actions don’t live up to Gospel ideals. There is a big difference between “nice” and kind; “nice “ values above all not hurting another person’s feelings. The kindness coming from love uplifts them as a person. Two entirely different things. And sometimes we have to be willing to hurt another’s feelings in order to give them the honesty they need to grow into a greater sense of God’s love. There is a way to be kind and honest without being rude, and I think we all know it when we see it. When it is given to us, we appreciate it. Do unto others, then, as you would have it done unto you.

That was the calling then; it is the calling now. The church should not be nice. Christ did not call a lukewarm church, and nice upholds a lukewarm image. We should not be interested in an image. Instead, we should be interested in giving people what they want: the ability to become more like Jesus Christ. We should be interested not in surface layer but transformation. Transformation does not come from nice. That philosophy comes with a lot of practice; the desire to be “nice” runs very deep. We’re taught in today’s society not to rock the boat. Don’t upset the calm waters; just go with the flow and be nice. But the flow doesn’t always lead to the loving place. It leads to nowhere. It takes courage to step out of “nice” and into truly loving. If we want to be like Jesus, we have to take the hard road. We have to love those we don’t want to love. We have to see others not as what we want them to be but as they are and love them all the same. These are not indicators of “nice” but of the transformative love of Jesus Christ, the transformative love that can save the world. It’s not “nice.” It’s serious business, but that’s what our God calls of us and what our neighbors deserve from followers of Christ.

I'm going to ask you: please don't be nice to me. Be loving. Be honest. If a sermon stinks, please tell me. If you think I'm doing a good job, please tell me. If there are things to be improved, tell me. These are signs of love that show you really care. These are far more loving than an empty compliment or being afraid to offer a suggestion in fear of hurting my feelings. In the final analysis, I just want to grow, to become the best pastor I can be. I hope your honest hope is to grow into the best Christian peoples you can be. In return, I have and will continue to seek to be as loving as I can to each and every one of you. I want to show you every day how much I care. Hold me accountable to these things, and I hope to hold you accountable to the same. Remember: no half measures; God calls for every inch of our lives if we want to be disciples of that incredible man Jesus Christ.

The lesson is simple: in our lives of growing deeper as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, don't be nice. Nice is boring. Nice is noncommittal. Nice stays on the surface when there is so much more to us. Nice doesn't last. Nice is the enemy of Christianity because we aren't being faithful followers of Christ; we are being faithful followers of good etiquette. Those aren't the same thing. We aren't truly and honestly loving one another; we are just trying to maintain an image of caring. Once that image goes away, we see there is no root of love. If we love instead, we start with the root, and the outside reflects who we are, and that is a real and good thing. We all know when others are just being "nice" to us when we want true friendship and true lovingness, and it leaves us unfulfilled. Don't victimize others with "nice" when you don't want it done to you. Remember Jesus Christ wasn't nice. Be like Jesus. Be real. Be honest. Be loving. Be willing to live out the seriousness of the Gospel, not the lukewarmness of nice. Thanks be to God for the guidance and the courage to live well in a world that desires nothing more than the surface layer. Amen and Amen!