

2018 11 04 – Gentleness

John 11:32-44

How many of you know the shortest verse in the bible? What is it? (*in many translations - John 11:35 “Jesus wept”*) In today’s reading we hear that Lazarus, Jesus’ good friend, and a brother to Mary and Martha, has died. Jesus, knowing of Lazarus’ death, has come to visit the family. When he arrives, Jesus is deeply moved by Mary and the other mourners, who are weeping profusely. Jesus responds by joining them in their grief. Jesus weeps.

In this passage we are able to see a softer side of Jesus. We meet a man who is empathetic, a man who is able to be in touch with his emotions, a man who can be tender. These are attributes that are often associated with gentleness. Gentleness is today’s “fruit of the spirit.” Gentleness is the quality of being gentle, or soft or tender. When someone is gentle, they are considerate of others; they are mild in mood; they are careful not to hurt; they are kind to their fellow human beings.

I’m sure you can think of people in your life who are nearly always gentle, who are mild-mannered and caring. But I also know that we all, at times, will stray from this particular fruit of the spirit. There are times in our lives when we are inconsiderate, angry, rude and even mean or offensive. Sometimes this happens without us even realizing it. One of the ways that we can unknowingly hurt others is by accepting and perpetuating stereotypes. We stereotype a person when we

assume that they are going to look or act a certain way based solely on a group that they belong to.

Last Sunday, our Affirming Ministry Committee held a session after worship where we asked people to name some of the ways that they are stereotyped. At this session we were looking at stereotypes based on age. Some of our seniors created a list of negative assumptions that they have experienced. The list included: “weak, can’t drive, a burden, out of the loop, technologically impaired, adverse to change, incapable of caring for myself, not able to make my own decisions.” I’m sure these stereotypes are familiar to many of you, especially if you feel that you fit into that category.

Of course, having these things assumed about you is painful. People that believe and share these stereotypes are definitely not practicing gentleness. But even worse is having these stereotypes escalate to discrimination.

Discrimination happens when a more powerful group of people denies opportunities to a less powerful group because they believe the stereotypes surrounding that group. When discrimination is accepted by society then we have created an “ism.” In this case we are talking about ageism.

Last Sunday, our group came up with three examples of discrimination and ageism already at work in our society:

1. In our healthcare system, when we talk about symptoms that we are experiencing and the doctor replies, “you’re just old.”

2. In our workplaces, where we are told to leave our job or are unable to get work because of our age.

3. In our families, when adult children are allowed to take away their parent's independence too early because they believe the stereotypes.

Gray Matters, a publication put out by the Saskatchewan Seniors Mechanism, has had several recent issues focused on ageism in healthcare and in the media. Ageism is real and it is rampant.

I want to share a brief story with you. This was told by a woman named Connie Goldman. Connie works with an organization called Eden Alternative, a non-profit agency that supports the well-being of elders. She wrote:

Sitting in a local coffee shop, I recently overheard a couple of women talking about ageism and the havoc it wreaks on older people. Working for The Eden Alternative, I was clearly high-fiving them on the inside, happy to hear this topic popping up during casual coffee talk. But then, almost in the same breath, the focus of the conversation shifted to teenagers today. The tone became scornful, and the words "lazy" and "entitled" and "aimless" were peppered throughout the banter.

<https://changingaging.org/culture-change/ageism-not-just-for-grown-ups/>

It's easy to name the stereotypes that people have about us. It is much harder to recognize all the ways that we stereotype others. Last Sunday we were also privileged to have some of the youth of our church amongst us. They had spent

the previous Saturday afternoon talking about ageism and how it affects their age group. They shared a very long list of stereotypes with us and a video that illustrated their reality vs. some of our misconceptions. Their list included: self-obsessed, lazy, boy/girl crazy, bad drivers, swear all the time, always drunk, on drugs, addicted to their phones, always getting into trouble etc.

How many of us have made comments like that about our youth in the last month or week or day? As Connie Goldman states,

“If nothing else, this is clear: For every step we take to fight ageism against Elders, we need to take an equivalent one for youth. For every Elder’s story that you listen to, take some time to get to know a young person. Ageism against any age group will never truly be defeated, unless we simultaneously deal with how it affects young and old alike.

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Of course, we know ageism is just one of the many forms of systematic discrimination that exist in our world today. Our news is full of examples of discrimination and even violence solely based on religion, gender, sexual orientation or economic class.

So what are we to do? First, we need to gentle with others. We need to work to eliminate stereotypes... especially the ones that we are holding on to. Second, we need to fight for justice; some of the gentlest people in the world have found non-violent ways to work for freedom and equality. Just think of Mahatma Gandhi or Mother Teresa.

And even more important we need to be gentle with ourselves. We need to be sure that we don't accept or internalize the stereotypes that society puts on us. Those stereotypes are like the linen cloths that covered Lazarus' body when he came out of the tomb. Jesus said to the crowd, "untie him and let him go free." We all deserve to be free, free from all stereotypes and the discrimination that bind us and keep us from living our own lives.

So I invite us all to look for the humanity and the sacredness in every person we meet. Let us treat each with respect and gentleness. Let us remember that in many ways they are a lot like us and we are a lot like them.