

What Inspires Kindness?

Week two of a five-part series “Practicing Kindness”

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, February 14, 2021

“And when she had finished giving him a drink, she said, ‘I will draw water for your camels also, until they have finished drinking.’” Genesis 24:19

Last week we began a five-week series on kindness. We discussed the Golden Rule, and how wisdom and kindness are the heart of what religion is all about. This week we look at the question of where kindness comes from and what motivates it in us. After all, not everyone is kind or wise, and we also know that apparently kind behavior can be hypocritical, and even harmful if it is misdirected. Motivation is a huge part of what makes kindness kind.

Today is Valentine’s Day and tomorrow is Presidents Day. Both of these occasions offer their own ways to practice and think about kindness and the motivations behind it.

The story of Rebekah at the well is an ideal illustration of what inspires kindness. It is not really a Valentine’s Day story – unlike the romantic story of Jacob meeting Rachel at this same well years later. But it gets at a key ingredient of happy relationships and marriages.

The story places Rebekah in a situation where she is free to make choices about what she is going to do. She makes the choice that seems to show that she is inspired by nothing other than genuine kindness and is therefore the perfect wife for Isaac. She is literally the answer to Abraham’s servant’s prayer.

Abraham’s servant had been sent from Hebron in the land of Canaan to the city of Nahor, in Mesopotamia, to find a wife for Isaac. Upon his arrival at the well in Nahor he prayed:

“Let it be that the young woman to whom I say, ‘Please let down your pitcher that I may drink,’ and she says, ‘Drink, and I will also give your camels a drink’-- let her be the one You have appointed for Your servant Isaac.”

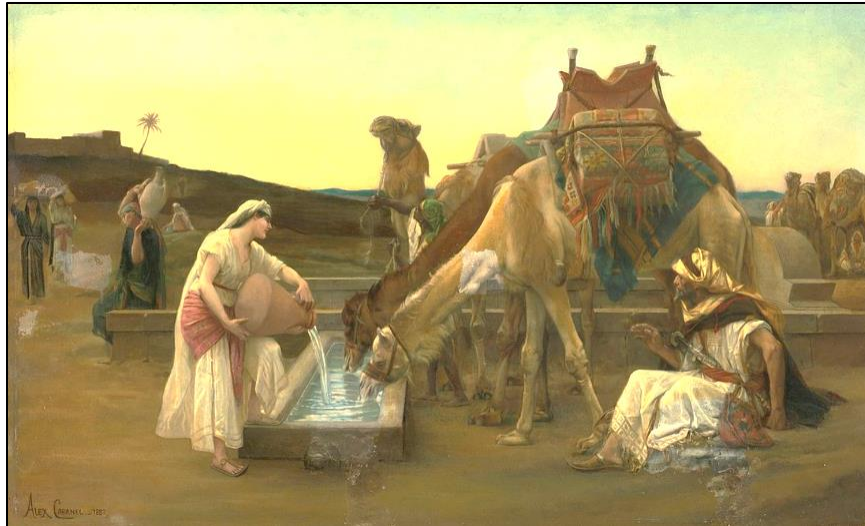
Rebekah is faced with a stranger who is making a request for a drink. She is under no obligation to help him, although the rules of hospitality that

prevailed at the time make it almost unthinkable to refuse him. She shows what kind of person she is when she goes beyond what he has asked for and offers to water his camels as well. This is no small offer. There are ten camels, and a thirsty camel can drink more than thirty gallons of water in a few minutes. It would have taken her a long time, and considerable effort, to draw up that much water. If that willingness to go out of her way was a test of her sincerity, she passed it with flying colors.

Testing whether kindness is genuine.

A common device in many traditional stories is that men trying to win a bride will be challenged with tasks to show their worthiness and sincerity.

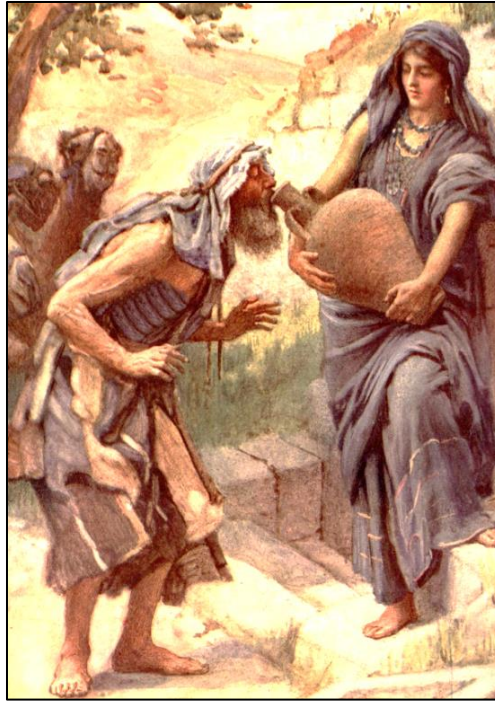
For example, in Greek mythology, King Pelias gave a task to the suitors of his beautiful daughter, Alcestis. She would marry the one who could yoke a lion and a wild boar to a chariot, a surely impossible task. Admetus, king of Thessaly, was the winner, but only because the god Apollo tamed the beasts and harnessed them for him.



In a similar example Icarius of Sparta made the many suitors of his daughter Penelope run a footrace to decide between them. Odysseus won, and Penelope became one of the most famously devoted wives in all of Greek mythology.

The Writings comment on how doing difficult things for someone else's sake has an effect on your relationship with them:

“Take for example a young man and the young woman he hopes to marry. When he confronts people who are destroying her reputation, surely he becomes more united to her. What about when he is injured fighting a rival? It is a law inscribed on nature that under these circumstances the couple will become more deeply united. In the same way, doing the other person's will is how a friend is united to a friend, a child to a parent, or a servant to the head of the household. If the friend, child, and servant defend their superiors against enemies they are more deeply united to them. If they fight for their honor they are even more deeply united to them.” True Christianity 131



The greater the challenge the stronger the motivation needs to be to face it, and the more clearly it often reveals what is inspiring the actions. The result can be a stronger union when the challenge is met. This is the promise behind Rebekah's kindness to Abraham's servant.

Why does she do it? It seems that she is doing it simply because it is the right thing to do, because she is a kind person, because she cares about his welfare even though she knows nothing about him.

It might be different if she had known who he was and what was about to happen to her.

Kindness can be inspired by external rewards.

In the work *“Spiritual Experiences”* we read about the way that little girls are raised in heaven. They are given beautiful clothes and gardens for their very own. Notice what it says about how they are taught by rewards:

“When they see spots on their clothing it is a sign

that they have had an evil thought and have done something that should not be done, and the spots cannot be wiped off as they can from clothing in the world... If they then repent from them, the spots disappear of themselves from their clothing... If they see there is a new garment in their room, then they inwardly rejoice, because they know that they have behaved well...

5665. And when they see the flowers in their little gardens losing color or changing for the worse, they notice. If the flowers change into something better and more beautiful, they are happy, because it is a sign that they have had proper thoughts.” Spiritual Experiences 5660-5665

These kinds of rewards and consequences are apparently appropriate for children in heaven, as are similar things in this world. It is interesting to think that there are apparently external rewards for children even in heaven.

Kindness is its own reward.

While it is perfectly normal for children to be motivated by rewards like these, even in heaven, this is not how angels think. Rewards and punishments help to shape behaviors and encourage habits, but they are a means to an end. As we read in our lesson, the kindness of a regenerate person is inspired by something deeper:

“The pleasure of doing good to their neighbor is their reward. The angels in heaven feel this pleasure. It is a spiritual pleasure that is eternal. It immeasurably surpasses every earthly pleasure. People who have this pleasure do not want to hear about getting credit - they love doing good and feel joy in it. It depresses them if someone thinks they are doing it to get something in return.” True Christianity 440

There is a hierarchy of reasons for practicing kindness, and for the opposite as well. Swedenborg recounts this interaction with people in the spiritual world who wanted to break into people's houses:

“I told them that such things were contrary to heavenly order; but to this they paid no attention

nor even understood what I was saying. I went on to ask whether they had no fear of the laws, or of punishments according to the law. But these they held in contempt. Only when I said that perhaps they would be severely beaten with sticks by the servants in those houses did they feel any fear.” (Arcana Coelestia 2748)

These kinds of hierarchies are present in every aspect of our lives, and we are often only vaguely aware of our motives. One interesting teaching about discovering our inspirations is this:

“Self-examination. (1) If it is only as to the actions, it discovers little; and this not enough. (2) But if it is as to the thoughts and intentions, it discovers more. (3) And if it searches out what the person regards or does not regard as sins, then it discovers [all]. For whatever people within themselves regard as allowable, that they do.” (Charity 5)

The question we ask ourselves, then, is whether we think that it is allowable to be inspired by things like honor, reputation and gain. These motives are natural for everyone, and they are certainly no crime. The question is only whether we are content with them, or whether we would rather be people for whom kindness is its own reward.

Our inspiration to patriotism.

This weekend we honor the service of our national leaders. We are all aware that some leaders are honored more than others, for a host of different reasons. One reason is the public perception of the nature of their devotion to the office. In a continuation of what we read from *True Christianity* in our lessons, there is a discussion of those who serve purely out of self-interest:

“They say they intend the country's well-being and are devoting their lives to it, but if they do not receive promotions and wealth as rewards, they bad-mouth the country and become allies with its enemies. When they do something good, it is not for the public good but for the pleasure they take in loving themselves and the world, which they inhale as the only form of good. The same sort of attitudes are possible in any line of work. The goal or purpose is the determining factor throughout.” (True Christianity 441)

This is why we love leaders who seem to love our country and their work for its own sake. All of us tend to do things for the sake of credit, but there

was a hopeful comment about this in our reading:

“It is easy for the Lord to erase people's idea that they deserve credit, provided those people attain (this love or) goodwill primarily through working justly and faithfully in the position, business, or line of work they are in and with the people with whom they interact.” (True Christianity 442)

It seems that the work itself, done justly and faithfully over time, tends to dampen our self-centered motivations. It is different, the passage says, with those whose works have been more obviously voluntary, where the idea of credit is harder to escape. Duty and service, practiced faithfully throughout our lives, create charity in our hearts and minimize our natural thoughts of reward.

The inspiration behind romantic love.

Something similar happens with romance. Our Valentine's Day inspiration can be deep or shallow. But as romance blossoms into the intention to marry, and moves from there to a long term, faithful union, loving and kind behavior will tend to become more sincere and genuine.

This sincerity is what Rebekah showed in her kind actions towards Abraham's servant at the well. She must have been amazed when he proceeded to give her valuable treasures, and even more later as he unfolded to her family the purpose of his journey. Her kindness was the answer to his prayer. When the time came for her to make a decision, she willingly returned to Canaan with him.

This is the kind of love that we celebrate as conjugal love, and we honor a similar unselfish devotion to duty tomorrow on Presidents' Day.

Next week we look at how kindness can support someone's well-being. We close with the account of Rebekah's arrival in the land of Canaan:

“And Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening; and he lifted his eyes and looked, and there, the camels were coming. ⁶⁴ Then Rebekah lifted her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from her camel; ⁶⁵ for she had said to the servant, “Who is this man walking in the field to meet us?” The servant said, “It is my master.” So she took a veil and covered herself.

⁶⁶ And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. ⁶⁷ Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent; and he took Rebekah and she became his wife, and he loved her.” Genesis 24:63-67

Readings from the Word

Genesis 24:14-19

Now let it be that the young woman to whom I say, 'Please let down your pitcher that I may drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I will also give your camels a drink'--*let her be the one* You have appointed for Your servant Isaac. And by this I will know that You have shown kindness to my master." ¹⁵ And it happened, before he had finished speaking, that behold, Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, came out with her pitcher on her shoulder. ¹⁶ Now the young woman *was* very beautiful to behold, a virgin; no man had known her. And she went down to the well, filled her pitcher, and came up. ¹⁷ And the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please let me drink a little water from your pitcher." ¹⁸ So she said, "Drink, my lord." Then she quickly let her pitcher down to her hand and gave him a drink. ¹⁹ And when she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw *water* for your camels also, until they have finished drinking."

True Christianity 439

As Long as We Believe That Everything Good Comes from the Lord, We Do Not Take Credit for the Things We Do as We Practice Goodwill (or Charity).

It is damaging for us to take credit for things we do for the sake of our salvation. Hidden within our credit-taking there are evil attitudes of which we are unaware at the time: denial that God flows in and works in us; confidence in our own power in regard to salvation; faith in ourselves and not in God...In our taking credit there is also a continual focus on our own reward and perception of it as our first and last goal, a stifling and an extinction of love for the Lord and love for our neighbor, and total ignorance and unawareness of the pleasure involved in heavenly love (which takes no credit), while all we feel is our love for ourselves.

440 - On the other hand, if people think about going to heaven and decide that they should therefore do what is good, this is not the same as making rewards their main goal or taking credit for their good deeds. People who love their neighbor as themselves and love God above all else have these thoughts because they have faith in the Lord's words that their reward will be great in heaven.

The pleasure of doing good to their neighbor is their reward. The angels in heaven feel this pleasure. It is a spiritual pleasure that is eternal. It immeasurably surpasses every earthly pleasure. People who have this pleasure do not want to hear about getting credit - they love doing good and feel joy in it. It depresses them if someone thinks they are doing it to get something in return.

442 - It is extremely important to realize that goodwill, or charity, is closely linked to faith in the Lord. The quality of the faith determines the quality of the goodwill...

It is easy for the Lord to erase people's idea that they deserve credit, provided those people attain (this love or) goodwill primarily through working justly and faithfully in the position, business, or line of work they are in and with the people with whom they interact. If, however, people believe that they attain goodwill through making charitable donations and helping the needy, it is difficult to rid them of the idea that they deserve credit, because as they make those contributions their desire for reward and credit, although obvious to them at first, becomes less noticeable [to them] as time goes by.

Spiritual Experiences 5660

Little girls in heaven) are given their clothing gratis, not knowing what they are going to put on every day, and [they are given] better clothing for holidays. And they also have little gardens...

When they see spots on their clothing it is a sign that they have had an evil thought and have done something that should not be done, and the spots cannot be wiped off as they can from clothing in the world. When they then discover what they have thought and done, because then they always think about it, they see their faults and evils. If they then repent from them, the spots disappear of themselves from their clothing...If they see there is a new garment in their room, they inwardly rejoice, for they know that they have behaved well.

5665 - And when they see the flowers in their little gardens losing color or changing for the worse, they notice. If the flowers change into something better and more beautiful, they are happy, because it is a sign that they have had proper thoughts.