

Elevator People

12 November 2006

Bible passage: Colossians 3:12 (*The Message*)

“So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline.”

I doubt seriously that there's anyone here this morning who's never ridden an elevator. Most of the time, I choose the escalator, if it's available, but there are times when that's not the case, and taking an elevator is the only option. Now, I'm not claustrophobic or anything, but I'm just not wild about elevators, and one of the things I find most uncomfortable is the way people behave when they're on one. You know what I mean—everyone stands facing the door, no one speaks, and all eyes are on the floors, either watching the numbers go up or down.

It seems as though the unwritten elevator etiquette requires that no one talk or look another person in the eye, and most of us seem to understand that. It's the rare individual who tries to continue a conversation with a fellow rider, or who tries to strike up a conversation with another passenger.

Why is that? Have you ever wondered? Well, when this topic showed up on our list of themes, I began to think about it, and actually looked into it a bit. This kind of behavior is referred to as the “Elevator Effect,” but it doesn't just occur on an elevator. It often happens on buses or the subway; it happens in a doctor's office, and other places—like a Laundromat. I'm told that this shift in human behavior occurs when strangers are confined together in a limited amount of space. In fact, one article I read even suggested that a classroom at the beginning of a new class is much like a closed elevator: everyone is a stranger to everyone else, all eyes are forward or toward the ceiling, and no one talks. Think about it.

In some ways, it seems as though an elevator is a microcosm of much of the world in which we live. We seldom speak to folks when we pass in the hall at work, let alone on the street! In many ways, it's like we're each in our own little bubble, and our individual bubbles never ever interact with any other bubbles as we make our way through the world.

I suppose some of it has to do with fear. After all, parents are pretty clear about warning their kids about talking to strangers, and it seems that, in this day and age, that's appropriate. Or after something like what happened on the Monon Trail a month or so ago, when a bike rider spoke to some teens, and they robbed him, beat him up, and stole his bike—I suppose we're pretty cautious about speaking to people who happen to be sharing the same space that we are, and to a degree, that's understandable.

Some of our fears, actually I'd say *most* of our fears are groundless. Kent Nerburn talks about that in an article he wrote. He tells about being in graduate school, and at the end of a semester, not being on good terms with his professor. The man had made a suggestion, and Nerburn had taken offense, and then the professor took offense at Nerburn's response. They had not seen one another the entire summer.

Now as the fall semester was beginning, Nerburn happened to look out the lab window and see that professor making his way across campus, and commented to a friend that he didn't want to see the guy because they didn't get along. His friend confronted Kent Nerburn by saying; “Maybe you've got it wrong. Maybe you're the one who's turning away, and you're just doing that because you're afraid.” The friend pointed out to Nerburn that the professor probably thought the he (Nerburn) didn't like him, and then suggested that someone had to break the cycle.

After absorbing what his friend had said, the writer said that he went down the stairs and into the parking lot to meet his professor, and he did so warmly, asking how his summer had been. The professor looked at Nerburn genuinely surprised, and then put his arm over Nerburn's shoulder, and the two walked off together chatting. All that fear—for nothing.

However, I wish that were the way every situation turned out, but even if it doesn't, I still don't think that's the way we're supposed to live. If we continue to live out of fear, trying to separate and isolate ourselves from everyone else, this is going to be a very lonely and unhappy planet. Isn't there another possible way to live?

I like to think that our **Bible passage** might hold a clue. Paul is the writer, and he's trying to help his readers understand the kind of life a person of faith is equipped to live. Our version reads like this: “So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline.”

Two words from this passage stand out for me—compassion and kindness. Compassion has to do with loving care for others just because they exist. It is about honoring the fact that each and every person is a person of worth and value, because God made and loves each one. It has nothing to do with what we do, and everything to do with who we are—we are God's creation, pure and simple.

Because we have compassion for others, then we relate to one another differently. No longer do we stand in isolation from one another, but we begin to show respect and kindness for the others who inhabit this world with us. In my view, that's a lot of what we're missing in today's world—just plain old “kindness.”

That may sound naive and like I'm a Pollyanna, or a simpleton, and I may be. Nonetheless, I for one am willing to

go that route instead of becoming more and more separate from my brothers and sisters next door and around the world. When it's all said and done, even if physical harm comes to me, I think—like that biker on the Monon—I'd still like to say what he did—that he would choose kindness again, given the same situation.

Where do we begin this whole thing of showing kindness to one another? It all starts with realizing that God loves each one of us; we're secure in God's love in a way that we will never experience any other form of security. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that all our attempts are heightened security as almost ludicrous; total safety and security is a pipedream.

As long as we live, there will be hazards to face. The question is how do we want to face them—depending on our own strength, or trusting in the God who never fails us or lets us down? I don't know about you, but I'll go with God every time. And when we go with God, we can live the way our Bible writer suggested—with compassion and kindness and a quiet strength.

So, what does it look like for us to live a life a kindness? It can start simply enough with replacing our frowns of fear and disapproval with a smile. It's a little thing, really, but a smile can make a world of difference.

As **William Arthur Ward** once wrote, "A warm smile is the universal language of kindness."

It's certainly a good place to start toward being a kinder, gentler person. Now, of course, I'm talking about a smile that's real, and not fake. You and I know the difference. A smile that is genuine is almost always accompanied with a twinkle in the eye, and a genuine smile is contagious. It conveys our sense of trust and well being, and it gives others the confidence to smile back. Let's try it the next time to go by someone on the street, or walk into an elevator. A smile and a "hi" can go a long way toward making our day and someone else's a whole lot better.

But there's more that we can do to be kind. For instance, we can hold the door open for the person coming in behind us. We can pick up litter at the park. We can forgive loud teenagers. We can let someone go ahead of us in the checkout lane, or let another driver merge in front of us. We can tip very well in a restaurant, and give up our table when we see a herd of folks waiting to be seated. We can put a coin in someone's expired parking meter, and remember to say "thank you" more often. Those are little things but they can make a whole lot of difference.

We can be kind no matter where we find ourselves in life—driving a taxi, or riding in one, eating in a fancy restaurant, or grabbing a McDonald's, being the maintenance person in a company, or the CEO. In fact, there was an article a while back in the *Indianapolis Star* about a local man who's CEO of Carmel-based Telamon Corporation. Said a long time friend,

"He treats people kinder than about anybody I know." When **Albert Chen** was asked about that, he says his philosophy of life and of business is built around the Chinese notion of harmony. This is what he says, "Harmony is not about denying or papering over differences, or insisting on sameness...Harmony requires recognizing differences among people, respecting the differences, and still working together toward a common goal."

I think Albert Chen "gets it." So does Isaac **Bashevis Singer**, who said, "Two important things are to have a genuine interest in people and to be kind to them. Kindness, I've discovered, is everything in life."

To that, I say, "ditto."

Closing:

Joan Duncan Oliver writes, "Kindness is one of the most undervalued commodities—which is too bad because it doesn't take much of it to turn the day around. I wonder if we overlook kindness because it's so simple. What's really involved? Someone needs something, we help. Someone feels love, we console. Someone trips, we catch them. There's a need, we respond. Then the other person is grateful and relieved—and we're happy knowing we could help. Kindness is a low-effort, high-return exchange." And so it is.

As we leave here this morning, let's try practice a little kindness. OK?

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.