

# Kindness is the Force

Ephesians 4:1-6; 25-32

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

January 8, 2023/First Sunday of Epiphany

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Today, we embark upon the 2023 Faith Questions sermon series. This is, incredibly, the sixth year we have done this.

I would have thought I would have answered all your questions decisively and persuasively by now, but it seems not. ☺

*[Faith Questions roadmap on screen]*

This week, I was thinking about the timing of this series. In the secular calendar, of course, the Faith Questions series more or less kicks off a new calendar year. And I like the idea of beginning a new year by wrestling with some of the questions of our community.

In the Christian calendar, the series takes place during the season of Epiphany, which began on Friday and stretches out until Ash Wednesday. This is a season for celebrating the revelation of God Incarnate in Jesus Christ.

And I hope that this will be at least in part reflected in our Faith Questions series, that it won't just be about scratching intellectual itches (important as this is), but about pointing to the mystery and the hope of Jesus Christ.

Each year when I look at the list of questions, I often find myself thinking, "Well, how are these going to work in *sermons*?" Lectures, maybe, but a sermon is not a lecture.

I am convinced that a sermon should always, at least in some form, proclaim good news. No good news, no sermon. And, from a Christian perspective, no Jesus, no sermon.

(If you hear a sermon—by me or anyone else—in a Christian church and you come away wondering where Jesus was, it was likely a sermon worth forgetting!)

I'm going to do my very best to remember this throughout this year's Faith Questions series. Because I do believe that Jesus is always there, lurking around in all our best and hardest questions.

Also, here at the outset, I will offer the usual caveat. A Sunday sermon can't really do justice to most of these questions. At best, we're scratching the surface, creating a space to think together. I hope these sermons can be helpful (I actually hope this for *all* my sermons!), but I have no illusions that they will be the last word on any of these topics. I hope that they can provoke further conversation and reflection.

One final word about the series before we move on to the first question. If you are a song leader or a worship leader or a children's storyteller over the next month and a half or so, you have my permission—my blessing, even—to not feel constrained by the question of the day as you choose songs, stories, liturgies, prayers, etc.

I am well aware that these questions do not all lend themselves thematically to a nice seamless linking between various elements of the service. Indeed, some Sundays I think other parts of the service will need to lift our spirits due to the heaviness of the topic!

The sermon is not the only or even the most important part of our gathered worship. The songs we sing, the prayers we pray, the stories we share, the Lord's supper, when we celebrate it—these, too, all proclaim the gospel in their own very important ways.

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On to the first question of our 2023 Faith Questions series. Actually, the first two weeks are kind of a package deal.

This week, we're talking about why Christians seem so prone to fighting about things, often things that aren't even core convictions of the faith.

(I can only assume the person who asked this question was referring to, you know, *other* churches; here we are all one shiny happy family that thinks the same about everything and where nobody ever ruffles anyone else's feathers.) ☺

Next week, we're talking about if it's possible for the church to hold unpopular opinions and still present Jesus in an attractive way.

The first question comes out of being hurt by people in church more committed to the “truth of the matter” than to actual people.

The second question asks if the church can still call people to hard things, to name uncomfortable truths (indeed, if we even have an obligation to do this).

I put these two back-to-back and at the beginning of the series very deliberately. If these are your questions (or you resonate with them in any way), don’t listen to one sermon and not the other.

Very broadly speaking, these two questions highlight a tension that has long been part of the Christian tradition, the tension between grace and truth. We are called to both. But we struggle to know how exactly to calibrate them.

In your bulletins, today’s question is: “Why do we in the church so often fight about peripheral stuff?” This was how I summarized a question that came in paragraph form.

But the *actual* question that began that paragraph was much more personal: “Why are people in our churches so mean?”

The question referenced all kinds of issues—divorce, music styles in the church, women in leadership, sexual diversity, indigenous issues, etc. It spoke of our tendency to make hard lines and to demonize those we deem to be the wrong side.

I going to go out on a limb and assume that church conflict is not a completely foreign concept to most people in this room, that you have at least *some* experience with *some* of the above?

So why *are* people in church so mean?

The answer is: because all people—even church people—are sinners.

Well, that was easier than I expected. Let’s sing our next song.

I’m kidding. But only partially.

I've been banging this drum for what feels like most of my pastoral life, but I am deeply convinced that our church and our world are in desperate need of a more realistic and more *Christian* anthropology (theory of human nature).

We need to recognize that we are all sinners in need of grace. This is crucial if we are *ever* going to cut each other some slack and back away from the judgmentalism that is so rampant, inside and outside the church.

Understanding that we are all weak, all broken, all prone to wander, all carrying around our own fears and anxieties and traumas and histories and insecurities, all falling short—at its best, this theology of human nature should make us more gracious and slower to judge one another.

I say this knowing full well that our sinfulness often makes us *more* not *less* prone to judge, and often in a meanspirited way.

As we see throughout church history, not least in the early life of the Apostle Paul, nobody can be quite as terrifying as a righteous person convinced they are being mean in the name of truth.

For all the times when we in the church have repeated Paul's sin, we must repent.

(I was very glad that Joani included a prayer of confession—unprompted!—in today's service).

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Speaking of Paul...

The text I chose for this sermon comes out of his letter to the Ephesians. He begins by describing himself as “a prisoner of the Lord and urging the church in Ephesus to “live a life worthy of the calling they received.”

What does this look like, according to the guy who once hunted down heretics for a living? What does a life worthy of the call of God look like?

<sup>2</sup> Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

<sup>3</sup> Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

<sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when

you were called; <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Humility, gentleness, patience, love... these words would not have described Paul before Jesus struck him blind on the road to Damascus.

They don't even always describe Paul *after* this decisive moment in his life. He still has his moments (most famously telling his enemies to go castrate themselves in Galatians... which doesn't sound particularly humble or gentle!).

Even the new Paul describes himself as "the worst of sinners," in desperate need of grace (1 Tim. 1:15).

But he now knows the goal to which he has been called. He knows that in a church full of sinners who will never behave rightly enough well enough or believe correctly enough, unity must trump unanimity.

The word "one" shows up seven times two verses.

One body, one Spirit, one hope. One Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

This is no accident. We are one not by virtue of anything we can come with on our own but because of the One who has claimed us and called us his own.

None of this is to say that truth doesn't matter. We'll talk more about this next week, but even here in this passage on unity, Paul says, "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor" (Eph 4:5).

But love is the higher law. As Paul will famously say in 1 Corinthians 13:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

In three short verses, Paul cuts across many if not all the common reasons that inspire meanness in church.

**Spiritual experience** (“the tongues of men or of angels” — charismatic Christians).

**Correct doctrine**, intellectual knowledge (“fathom all mysteries and knowledge” — conservative Christians).

**Proper ethics** (“if I give all I possess to the poor” — progressive Christians).

Christians can be mean in all three of these directions. I have seen it.

I have seen Christians weaponize spiritual experience, implying that those who don’t have the kinds of charismatic experiences or the same prayer life or display the correct amount of emotion in worship are somehow less holy, less faithful, less in touch with God.

I have seen conservative Christians weaponize doctrine, implying that those who don’t have the right beliefs about God or the bible or this or that theological issue are somehow less pure, less righteous, less Christian.

I have seen progressive Christians weaponize a very particular vision of social justice, implying that anyone who doesn’t get in line with the right politics or the right perspective on social issues is less enlightened, less compassionate, less Christ-like.

It’s all ugly. It’s all mean. And it’s all wrong.

We all like to point to the meanness of those *other* Christians (usually the ones we don’t want to identify with), but none of us has a monopoly on meanness.

Without love, Paul says, all the religious things that we use to justify ourselves— experience, doctrine, ethics—are just and noisy and useless. We need to remember this.

We need to remember our common human frailty, and to, to use Paul’s language again, “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Eph. 4:32).

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Well, let’s end with rock and roll, shall we?

A month or so ago, I became aware of a guy named Nick Cave. I had never heard of the Australian singer, songwriter, poet, and author before this.

It wasn't his music that grabbed my attention a month ago, but the title of his new book: *Faith, Hope, and Carnage*. What a title!

I did a bit of investigation and I found that Nick Cave is in some ways your typical rock and roll singer, with the sordid past to prove it.

But he has also been on a remarkable spiritual journey, a journey which, in his words, took a decisive turn when he lost his 15-year-old son Arthur who fell from a cliff in 2015. This loss, he says, changed everything for him. It made him a religious man.

Now, be warned, Nick Cave's version of "a religious man" might not exactly square with yours. He's no choir boy. Just in case you should do any digging around online.

But he seems to have tapped into a deep well of spiritual wisdom and connection. Suffering has brought him to the suffering God.

Nick Cave also seems to have his own version of a Faith Questions series, except it's not just for a few weeks at the beginning of the year, it's all the time.

He has a website called The Red Hand Files where he simply responds to fans' questions. The questions cover a wide range, but many are among the biggest a human being can ask—questions about God and goodness and grief and loss.

Like this one, from Beau, in Sussex, England: "What is the point of life?" Questions don't come much bigger than that one.

Some might think it a risky business taking spiritual advice from rock and roll singers, but you know me well enough by now to know that I don't share this opinion. Our artists and our poets are often our prophets.

After talking about how sin and suffering are part of the human condition, here's how Nick Cave responded to this question about the point of life:

Yet happiness and joy continue to burst through this mutual condition. Life, it seems, is full of an insistent, systemic and irrepressible beauty... I believe we are

meaning-seeking creatures, and these feelings of meaning, relational and connective, are almost always located within kindness. **Kindness is the force that draws us together**, and this... is what I think I am trying to say—that despite our collective state of loss, and our potential for evil, there exists a great network of goodness, knitted together by countless everyday human kindnesses...

Through kindness we slant, shockingly and miraculously, toward meaning.<sup>1</sup>

I would say that through kindness we also slant toward God. For what is kindness but an expression of love? And what is love but the point of it all?

Sue, in Paris, asked Nick Cave another question: “In your opinion, what is God?”

Dear Sue,

God is love, which is why I have difficulty relating to the atheist position. Every one of us, even the most spiritually resistant, yearns for love, whether we realise it or not. And this yearning calls us forever toward its objective—that we must love each other. *We must love each other.*<sup>2</sup>

When rock and roll singers and the Apostle Paul sing the same note, we would do well to pay attention.

This conviction, the very ground zero of the Christian faith, is the only antidote to the meanness out there, whether in the church or in the broader culture. *We must love each other.*

May God help us to be kind. May God draw us ever closer to the love that overwhelms all our meanness.

Amen.



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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/what-is-the-point-in-life/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/in-your-opinion-what-is-god/>