

are learning to extend to others. I say this with the full realization that there are many voices in our culture that would encourage us to "be patient with ourselves" and to "give ourselves a break." In urging you to be patient with yourself I do not mean to encourage an irresponsible indulgence that turns a blind eye toward your own faults and shortcomings or those of others. Rather, I am encouraging you to embody a wide-eyed patience and long-suffering. No farmer expects the seedlings to produce ripe and robust fruit in only a few days. This patience embodied by the farmer does not, however, keep that very same farmer from diligently uprooting the weeds that threaten and inhibit good growth. Pray, therefore, for the wisdom to recognize the difference between patience and indulgence.

Lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. (Col 1:10-12)

SIX

Cultivating Kindness in the Midst of Self-Sufficiency

*Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.
I was to them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them. (Hos 11:3-4)*

If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Lk 6:33-36)

Billboards with the slogan began appearing sometime in the early 1990s. Since then there have been books written about it, talk shows devoted to it and thousands of bumper stickers promoting it. And although I don't remember when or where I first saw a billboard with the slogan, I do remember having no idea what was being advocated. The plain black-and-white billboard simply urged: "Practice Random Acts of Kindness."

Some time later I read a newspaper account about this movement. According to Gavin Whitsett, the author of a little purple handbook entitled *Guerrilla Kindness*, the movement is a response to the "random acts of violence" that fill the news each day. Whitsett and others like him encourage

people to do such things as pay bridge tolls for cars behind them, buy a pack of mints for a friend with bad breath, wave to kids in school buses, send flowers to a convalescent home or sow nickels in a playground sandbox. Admittedly their objectives in doing all of this remain modest: "My aim is only to remind people of the kind impulses that all of us have, remind people of something they already know, which is that it feels good to act on those impulses." With this in mind, Whitsett's book offers "some fun, neat things you can do to surprise people and feel good at the same time. That's all."¹

What a powerful commentary on our society. Our lives are so filled with the pursuit of self-interest, so disconnected from one another, so void of the sense that we actually *need* each other, that we must create momentary connections and goodwill by practicing "random acts of kindness." I have to confess that I remain a bit suspicious of a movement whose aim is largely to provide opportunities for us to feel good about our random beneficence. Although I certainly don't think it's a terrible thing to walk into a donut shop and pay for the next twenty coffees, I wonder in what sense this act is "kind." Is it possible that this way of practicing kindness—where both the benefactor and the beneficiary remain ignorant of each other's most profound needs—reflects some of our culture's deepest (and most problematic) impulses? Are such acts what Paul had in mind when he wrote that the fifth fruit of the Spirit is kindness? Or are "random acts of kindness" a kind of dwarf species that grows in a culture like ours?

My seeming nit-picking will undoubtedly perturb some readers. "Shouldn't we be glad," some will surely remark, "that people are engaging in random acts of kindness rather than random acts of violence or indifference?" I am sympathetic to such rejoinders and realize that in raising questions about such a movement I am likely to be accused of focusing on the "half-empty glass." My reason for raising the example, however, is not to try to get people to quit doing so-called random acts of kindness. Rather, my probing concerns how Christians should understand the relationship between these efforts and the fruit of kindness that the Spirit nurtures in our lives. To gain more clarity about that matter, we must turn to Scripture to examine the ways in which the concept of kindness functions there.

The Character of Kindness

Virtues or dispositions are often profoundly displayed through stories. The Old Testament, for example, tells of the deep and abiding friendship between David and King Saul's son, Jonathan. When the king becomes jealous of David's military prowess and threatens to have David executed, Jonathan intervenes and warns David, making it possible for him to escape. But before he flees, David and Jonathan make a covenant with each other, promising that they will care for the descendants of the other should one of them be killed (1 Sam 20). Some time later both King Saul and Jonathan are killed in battle. David, who is now king, remembers his covenant with Jonathan and inquires about Jonathan's living descendants, "Is there anyone remaining of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness of God?" (2 Sam 9:3). Upon learning that Jonathan left a crippled son named Mephibosheth, David sends for him and informs him that he will eat at David's table like one of his own sons. This act of covenant love David calls "the kindness of God."

The Hebrew word that David uses is one that we have already encountered: *hesed*. And although modern versions often translate it as "love" or "steadfast love," they also use "kindness," "lovingkindness," "mercy," "goodness" and "devotion." It is what Job claims his friends have withheld from him (Job 6:14) and what the writer of Proverbs says that we should pursue along with righteousness in order to find life and honor (Prov 21:21). It is one of three things that Micah tells his audience the Lord requires of them: "to do justice, and to love kindness [*hesed*], and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8). And when the word of the Lord comes to Zechariah, the Lord says, "Render true judgments, show kindness [*hesed*] and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor, and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another" (Zech 7:9-10).

The Greek word most often translated as "kindness" is *chrēstotēs*, a word that appears in the New Testament only ten times. We get an idea of the range of its meaning when we note that the King James Version most often translates this as "goodness" or "kindness," though in the fifth chapter of Galatians the King James Version renders it as "gentleness." (This creates

some confusion, because most recent translations render the *ēgēhē* fruit of the Spirit as “gentleness.”

But the picture is even more complicated because the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) occasionally uses the word *chrēstos* to translate the Hebrew word *ṭōb*, which is often translated as “good” or “goodness.” Thus at the close of Psalm 23, David writes, “Surely goodness (*ṭōb/chrēstos*) and mercy (*hesed/eleos*) shall follow me all the days of my life.” Indeed, so closely connected are God’s kindness and God’s steadfast love that they are often treated as synonymous. For example, the most common refrain that echoed throughout Israel’s worship was, “O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good [*ṭōb*], for his steadfast love [*hesed*] endures forever” (1 Chron 16:34; 2 Chron 5:13; 7:3; 20:21; Ezra 3:11; Ps 100:5; 107:1; 118:1, 29; 136:1-26; Jer 33:11).

The upshot of this brief foray into lexical details is simple: we are confronted again with the overlapping character of the Spirit’s fruit. Just as there is no precise point on the rainbow where red ends and orange begins, so there is often no tidy way to distinguish between one fruit of the Spirit and another. What we call God’s steadfast love cannot be neatly distinguished from God’s goodness, nor can either one be easily distinguished from God’s mercy and kindness. Just as Paul wrote to the Corinthians that love is patient, so he acknowledges that love itself is kind (1 Cor 13:4).

Kindness is a particular manifestation of love’s other-directedness. Kindness seems to manifest itself as a certain way of being helpful to those who need help. Such helpfulness stems first of all from God’s helpfulness, of which the Christian is imminently mindful. That is, Christians are moved by the Spirit to reach out and help others because their own identity is intimately tied to the help they have received at God’s hand. To paraphrase 1 John 4:19: “We help because God first helped us.”

This fruit by its very character, therefore, is one of the most outwardly *visible* fruit of the Christian life. Kindness is neither a state of mind nor an invisible attitude or emotion. Neither do we think people kind simply because they refrain from doing unkind things. Rather, we regard people as kind because they go out of their way, often quietly and without fanfare, to engage

in kind actions. Nitty-gritty, concrete, everyday kinds of actions. We know from the early church fathers that many people during the first century were confused about what these strange followers of Jesus were called. Because the Greek word for Christ (*christos*) was so similar to the word for “kind” (*chrēstos*), apparently many people mistakenly (though perhaps fittingly) called Jesus’ early followers not “Christians” but “the kind ones.”

Are Christians today likely to be identified by those around them as “the kind ones?” Because much about our society inhibits the cultivation of kindness, those who desire to bear the fruit of kindness would do well to reflect on those common stories, practices and convictions that regularly thwart the Spirit’s work.

Obstacles to a Life of Kindness

Perhaps we can position ourselves to name some of the obstacles that inhibit the cultivation of kindness if we begin with the assumption that kindness, at its most basic level, involves the giving and receiving of help. Is there anything about our society that inhibits the giving and the receiving of help?

Promoting self-sufficiency. Even the casual observer is likely to answer with a resounding yes. From an early age we hear extolled the virtues of self-reliance, independence and autonomy. In a similar way, we figure out quite early that to ask for help is not only potentially burdensome to someone else but also tantamount to failure. To seek help is to admit weakness and inadequacy. To accept help is to admit that you cannot do it on your own. Parents routinely acknowledge that one of their goals for their children is to help them be “independent” as soon as possible. Young people growing up in our culture know that they are being readied for the day when they will be “on their own,” part of which requires them to be economically self-sufficient. Our society admires those who have “made it,” by which is usually meant the attainment of economic self-sufficiency; moreover, we particularly sing the praises of those who have made it “on their own.” In the past we have paid such people the ultimate compliment by identifying them as self-made men.

Perhaps one of the reasons we find it difficult to be kind, therefore, is that from an early age our society instills in us a certain subtle prejudice against

the giving and receiving of help. In a society like ours, to offer help is always to run the risk of offending the persons being helped by implying that they are weak and inadequate. For the same reasons, most of us likely find it difficult to *receive* help, preferring instead to handle matters "on our own," lest we be perceived as weak. I believe that it is telling that most of us are quite willing to admit our dependence on certain kinds of technologies and conveniences ("I simply couldn't live without my microwave or my cell phone"), while we have become increasingly reluctant to admit that we need one another.

In calling attention to the one-sided and unhealthy emphasis our society places on self-sufficiency, I do not mean to suggest that we should prefer relationships of utter dependency. The dehumanizing character of dependency has been widely reported during the recent national debate over welfare reform. Many people seem to agree that placing people in situations where they are completely dependent upon others for their survival can have insidious long-term consequences. These discussions may oversimplify the matter, however, when they identify the culprit in such situations as simply "dependency." This suggests that all forms of dependency are illegitimate and harmful. I would argue to the contrary that what is dehumanizing is not dependency *per se*, but dependency without opportunity for reciprocity. By denying people an opportunity to give something back, such situations often create an unbearable burden of indebtedness.

Let me elaborate by returning to the practice of gift giving. Most societies have sophisticated (even though often unarticulated) ways of deepening, extending and cementing human relationships through networks of obligation and reciprocity. For example, friendships are often established and sustained through rituals of gift giving. Offering another person a gift creates a sense of indebtedness and obligation, whether the gift is a tangible item, an act of hospitality, or some other act of kindness. To accept that gift is to accept the "burden" of indebtedness that goes along with it, realizing that in due time, if the relationship continues, you are expected to seek out an opportunity to reciprocate. Therefore, any healthy friendship requires the willingness to give and to receive, to place another in one's debt and in turn to be placed in

theirs. In short, giving and receiving one another's acts of kindness binds us to one another.

Most of us have internalized these assumptions and expectations long ago, even if we have rarely reflected upon them. We assume that people who choose not to reciprocate are not necessarily rude but are likely sending a signal (whether conscious or not) that they are unwilling to extend or deepen the relationship beyond its current level. Similarly, most of us also have internalized certain assumptions about reciprocity and timing. If you give your friend a gift today and she in turn shows up on your doorstep tomorrow with a gift for you, you are apt to wonder about the health and status of the relationship. Such an action betrays an unwillingness to be indebted to you. Because nearly all relationships involve webs of indebtedness, your friend's action suggests an unwillingness to be in an ongoing relationship with you. By attempting to settle the score so quickly, your friend has sent a signal (albeit not a very subtle one) that she prefers not to be obligated to you any longer and therefore not to be bound to you in any way. Such expectations about the timing of acts of reciprocity even seem to hold for something as seemingly mundane as offering another person a compliment. We have all probably had the experience of complimenting another person only to have them turn around and immediately offer *us* a compliment. The irritation that we likely feel is primarily the result of having our act of kindness rebuffed by someone who cannot accept a gift without immediately reciprocating. Such a response undercuts our gift as a gift and transforms it into little more than a clumsy exchange.

As I noted in the earlier chapter on love, one of the striking features of our society is how much of our lives are structured around market exchanges. Such exchanges, if allowed to dominate all areas of our lives, undercut attempts to offer and receive love and kindness by turning all such acts into mutually beneficial and ultimately self-interested exchanges. The widely acknowledged advantage of market exchanges is that they are remarkably efficient; the less-often-recognized disadvantage is that these exchanges are also remarkably impersonal. As a result, these exchanges feed my illusion of self-sufficiency. I come to believe that because I work hard at my job, bring home a decent paycheck and pay my bills with my own hard-earned dollars that I

myself have secured my (and my family's) well-being.

We need only to reflect a moment, however, to see how such thinking is deeply deceptive. Market exchanges give the illusion of self-sufficiency because they create so little conscious sense of attachment, so little sense of indebtedness. When I go through the checkout line at the grocery store, I am largely oblivious to the thousands upon thousands of people who have made it possible for these items to be readily available. Consider, for example, how many people are involved in bringing to your grocery shelf a single box of breakfast cereal. In addition to the obvious participants—farmers, people who process the grain, people who work in production plants, transport personnel at various stages and people who stock shelves—think as well about all the support personnel who make it possible for *their* people to do *their* jobs. Here we have such people as fuel suppliers and utility company workers, manufacturers of machinery and administrative personnel. Yet the chain doesn't stop there, for countless other people make it possible for *their* people to do *their* jobs, who are in turn supported by countless others. Where could one plausibly stop this seemingly endless chain of mutual support and *interdependence*?

Once we recognize this rather obvious fact—that all of us are profoundly indebted to millions of people we have never met and will never meet—we are faced with an even more obvious frustration. It is seemingly impossible to feel indebted to these countless people because every person who works hard to produce a box of cereal or a jar of peanut butter remains largely invisible and anonymous to me. What does it mean to be indebted to hundreds or thousands of faceless people? How can I possibly thank them? How do I reciprocate?

Yet the crucial point is that most of us feel no need either to thank anyone or to reciprocate. Why is this? Because all of us, whether consciously or not, well understand that this relationship is of a different kind, one that we identify as a market exchange. In short, I do not have to feel obligated to anyone because I have *already* reciprocated: I paid for my groceries. I need not feel obligated because I got what I wanted and they (whoever they are) got what they wanted. No ongoing indebtedness. No need for reciprocity. We're even.

What does all this mean for our life together as a society? We live in a society (and a world) that is creating ever-more complex and intricate webs of interdependence. But because so many of these relational webs are structured around self-interested market exchanges and are mediated by impersonal means (such as money and electronic technology), we are offered the illusion of self-sufficiency. For Christians such an illusion often inhibits the work of the Spirit in our lives as we seek to cultivate the fruit of kindness. How do we learn to be kind to those around us and freely offer our help when their (and our) stated goal in life is to become ever more self-sufficient? Equally vexing is learning to *receive* acts of kindness from others without seeing this as an indictment of our weakness. How do we learn to admit that we need help and, subsequently, to receive that help graciously, when we live in a society that teaches us that all requests for help are signs of weakness and incompetence?

Christians who desire to nurture the fruit of kindness need to recognize that at the center of our society stands a fundamental contradiction. We live in a society where people's day-to-day existence has never before been so dependent on the service rendered by other people, yet more and more people (including many Christians) have as their stated goals in life independence and self-sufficiency. What could such goals possibly mean in an age like ours? Why are such goals even desirable?

Nurturing autonomy. This last question leads us to consider briefly another "plant" in addition to self-sufficiency, that our society nurtures and highly prizes. Although this plant looks very similar to that of self-sufficiency, it bears its own kind of fruit and poses its own threat to the cultivation of kindness. This plant is what we call "autonomy."

To be autonomous is to be self-directed and self-governed. Historically autonomy has been especially valued in the West since the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The elevation of autonomy to a place of privilege was usually paired with the rejection of other forms of authority. The center of authority was no longer located in the prince, the church or the traditions and teachings of the past, but in the individual person. Rather than having one's life directed by external authorities of one

kind or another, the new goal was to be an autonomous individual, one whose life was directed by the dictates of one's own reason and one's own moral compass. To such understandings of autonomy all forms of dependence (including interdependence) pose a serious threat. To be anything other than self-directed is to remain in servitude and bondage.

Before we turn to the problems that such a one-sided emphasis has spawned, we should acknowledge that many people believe that Enlightenment advocates of autonomy had a legitimate point. What Immanuel Kant and others objected to was the servile and unthinking ways in which people accepted the pronouncements of those occupying traditional positions of authority. Although it might be acceptable to expect a five-year-old to do something simply because "Mommy said so," Kant and many others since his time have insisted that such reasons are insufficient and must give way to more "substantive" reasons. Indeed, on one level the history of moral argument and reasoning in the West since that time can be read fairly as a debate about what kinds of reasons would count as being more substantive.

Some parties to this debate have insisted that any reasons rooted in tradition are likely insufficient. The watchword for Kant and others was "Dare to think for yourself." Yet we are far enough down the road since Kant's day to see that such advice by itself undercuts attempts at forging agreements about how we as a society should conduct ourselves. Hence, although our society takes it as axiomatic that encouraging dependence amounts to encouraging irresponsibility, we are now better positioned to see that fostering independence and autonomy can do so as well. As a society we seem loath to admit that we are now in a large part reaping the harvest from the seeds of autonomy we have for so long planted and nurtured. For example, we smugly identify fathers who "shirk their family obligations" as irresponsible or as deadbeat dads. But on what basis do we as a society make this judgment? Where did these obligations come from and who is authorized to say that we must keep them? Is it possible that many of these fathers are simply living out the dream of being an autonomous individual? "Why should I be tied down by a family," they might ask, "when doing so infringes on my autonomy, my right to be self-directed and self-governing? How can I do *what* I want

to do *when* I want to do it, when I have to keep answering to my wife and children? I don't want my life to be directed by their needs and desires; I want to do my own thing." How can a society praise unconditionally the value of autonomy and then condemn people when they exercise it?

Underwriting self-sufficiency and autonomy. As I hope the above makes clear, self-sufficiency and autonomy are not simply disembodied ideas. Rather, as deeply held convictions about the aim of human life, they offer direction to human enterprises. If we look at a few examples, we can see how deeply these convictions are woven into the fabric of everyday life.

Most of us will spend a huge portion of our lives working. Many of us began working in high school to earn money for gasoline and clothes, continued to work through college to help with expenses and gain valuable experience and then pursued a career after college that would be both personally satisfying and financially rewarding. Over the years it became second nature to believe that our talents and abilities belonged to us, that they were *our* resources to exploit for our own gain. Within such a framework, work is not first of all mutual service but the way in which we secure our own wants and desires by our own hands. Moreover, fellow workers are often viewed as competitors who are vying for the same scarce resources: a compliment from the boss, a raise, a promotion.

Much of our education system underwrites a similar perspective. Regardless of the subject or the setting (public, private, parochial), we come to learn that what most counts is what *I* learn, what *I* know, what *my* grades are. As a result, we routinely view our peers primarily as competitors. We learn at an early age that whatever intellectual abilities we have are ours and should be exploited for our own benefit. Why should I use my gifts and abilities to help anyone else learn?

So widespread is this perspective that it spills out into many areas of our lives. Many high school coaches, for example, find it next to impossible to get players focused on working together rather than for individual honors. "Why should I work together if doing so means someone other than me might be named MVP?" Similarly, many marriage partners find it difficult to view their spouses as *partners*, so accustomed are they to viewing other people as

competitors. If one spouse receives an honor or a promotion, does the other feel a sense of satisfaction knowing that he or she helped to make this possible? Or does the other spouse feel slighted, believing that the honor or promotion was earned at his or her "expense"?

We might be inclined to view all this self-seeking as just another example of human selfishness. Although such a view has merit, I believe there is more going on, for the issue is not simply whether we are selfish, but whether certain societies encourage us to see things primarily through self-serving lenses. By encouraging us to view ourselves as self-sufficient and autonomous, cultures like ours encourage us to evaluate our present well-being almost exclusively in terms of our own contributions. At least this seems to be so when things are going well. In other words, when we are pleased with the state and direction of our lives, we are inclined to take the credit, noting those ways in which we have secured our current success. When things go poorly, we often look for someone else to blame, a situation that has created what some people have termed a "culture of victims."

Yet those who critique this "culture of victims" often fail to recognize that most of us do not complain when things go well. When something happens in our life that we take to be good, no one cries out, "I've been victimized!" This suggests that the problem is not, as some have suggested, that people no longer want to take any responsibility for their lives. The problem, rather, is that we are highly selective, taking *more* credit than we ought to when things go well and taking *less* than we ought to when things go poorly. The great challenge in a culture such as ours, a culture that so values autonomy and self-sufficiency, is to recognize the intricate ways in which our lives are woven together. Our actions *do* have an impact on other people, and their actions *do* impact us. We are not self-sufficient and autonomous, nor would it be a good thing if we were. As a result, the sooner we recognize that our well-being is always bound up with that of others, the better off we'll all be.

Although such a posture of interdependence would seem to resonate with much about the Christian story, it appears that many Christians and churches find it difficult to challenge their cultural indoctrination into the virtues of self-sufficiency and autonomy. Most of us do not see ourselves as dependent

on or responsible for our fellow brothers and sisters. Rather, most of us regard ourselves as autonomous individuals and as members of one another only in some derived sense. If you are honored, I may try to muster a congratulation, but I do not feel honored myself. Similarly, if a tragedy strikes your life, I may feel sorry for you and may even offer to do what I can to help, but I likely feel none of your pain. Your life is your life and mine is mine. Moreover, my bank accounts, my insurance policies, my accumulated stuff are my ways of insuring, whether consciously or not, that I won't need to depend on you or anyone else in the future. There is no need for you to believe that I will ever need your help; I can take care of myself quite nicely, thank you.

Seen in this light, is it possible that Jesus' warning about laying up for ourselves treasures on earth (Mt 6:21-23) was a warning about the posture of independence (from God and others) that such hoarding creates, a posture that undercuts Christian community and all gestures of kindness? Is it possible that there is a profound connection between the absence of God that we often experience and the fact that we have so arranged our lives as to make God (and even each other) all but superfluous?

Cultivating Kindness

As the discussion above suggests, the dominant culture does not necessarily mount a frontal attack on the virtue of kindness. It is not as if our society is set on uprooting kindness and replacing it with hard-hearted and mean-spirited plants. But as indicated early on, the absence of hard-heartedness and mean-spiritedness hardly makes one kind. The problem seems to be that by nurturing self-sufficiency and autonomy, our society unwittingly inhibits the growth of kindness. Fortunately God has given us much needed resources for nurturing the fruit of kindness in our lives.

Remembering our story. Once again we begin with worship and with an obvious observation: we gather regularly to acknowledge God as creator and sustainer, a fact that should serve as a constant reminder that we did not get here on our own. However easy it may be in our culture to continue the charade that we have secured whatever we have by our own hands, such notions should not find fertile ground among God's people. Surely people

who gather regularly with other believers to give thanks and praise for God's unbounded grace should find it difficult to think of themselves as in any sense self-sufficient.

Not only is our gathering for worship itself a gesture of dependency, but the story we rehearse each time we gather also has as one of its central themes our utter dependence upon God. From the opening chapters of Genesis, where we are told that we are *creatures*, to the closing chapters of Revelation, where we behold something of the future that *God* is bringing, Scripture reminds us again and again that we are not "self-made men." Furthermore, that God's people need constant *reminding* of this simple but profound truth is *also* part of our story. For example, when the children of Israel are poised to enter Canaan after their many years of wandering, God warns them that their future prosperity will tempt them to forget their past, tempt them to forget how they have come to be where they are and tempt them to believe that it was by their own power and might that they have prospered (Deut 8; cf. Ps 44).

In the New Testament, Paul echoes this warning about trusting in our own strength and power by suggesting that at the heart of the gospel is a corollary truth: God glories in working through human weakness. When we act out of our own strength, we are often tempted to glory in our own abilities, our own prowess in making things happen. But when God works through our weaknesses, we are reminded that God's grace, not our abilities, is sufficient. Hence, when Paul appeals to God three times to remove his "thorn in the flesh," God replies, "My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

In sum, when we as Christians remember our story, we remember a story of matchless and inexhaustible grace. As Paul insists, God has shown us "the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:7). Our story is not one of impressive accomplishments achieved by our own talents, our own abilities, our own hard work; rather, ours is a story about receiving what we did not deserve, what we in no way earned, what we could not secure for ourselves. We are and will always remain recipients of God's good gifts. What sets us apart from others is not that we've received these

gifts and they haven't, but that we know whom to thank and they may not. As a result, we are free both to offer and to receive acts of kindness without having this threaten our identity or self-understanding.

Nurturing connections. One of the most precious gifts that God has given us is each other. That we regularly fail to appreciate this suggests how deeply we have assimilated our society's teachings about self-sufficiency and autonomy. Rather than see each other as gifts from God, we are often inclined to view each other as potential threats or competitors. How could it be otherwise in a society so steeped in individualism and so bent on cultivating self-sufficiency and autonomy?

Even if we were disposed to temper our culture's emphasis on the individual, most of us would view with suspicion any emphasis on "the community." Even if many of us recognized that an overemphasis on the individual could be unhealthy, the stories that continue to underwrite individualism in this society warn us of the manifold dangers of communities. These dangers include such things as totalitarianism, groupthink and homogeneity. In sum, whatever worries we may have about the acids of individualism, most of us worry *more* about the dangers seemingly inherent in emphasizing group identity.

These worries are partly rooted in the very ways we have come to understand the relationship between individuals and groups. We tend to think of individuals and groups as discreet entities; the only debating point concerns which entity is given pride of place. According to this view, some people believe that the group exists to serve the needs of the individual, while the rest believe the opposite—that the individual exists to serve the needs of the group. In the former view the individual is all-important, while in the latter view, the group is. The problem with both views, however, is that they understand these as discreet entities and then pit them against each other, insisting that we determine which one is more important.

To understand the shortcomings of such a perspective, we need only reflect on what is arguably the most profound image employed in the New Testament to describe the church: the body of Christ (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4:1-16). As noted in an earlier chapter, this beautiful and powerful image

radically challenges most of our common understandings. For example, when one thinks of a healthy, functioning body, it makes little sense to ask whether the body parts exist for the body or whether the body exists for the body parts. It makes no sense to think of the body and the body parts as discreet entities and then to ask which one of them has priority over the other. The mistake is to assume you can have one apart from the other. But this is not possible: you cannot have a body without already having body *parts*, and you cannot have functioning body parts unless they already belong to a *body*. So rather than pitting the body and its parts against each other, we need to think of them as *constitutive* notions; that is, they are notions that come together, constituting each other as coherent notions.

Once we get clear about this matter, we can stop asking such questions as: Which is more important, the individual Christian or the church? According to Scripture, Christians *have* no separate identity apart from the body of Christ. Becoming a Christian and becoming engrafted into the body of Christ are the same thing. This is why Paul can insist that we belong to each other, that we are "members of one another" (Rom 12:5; Eph 4:25). Belonging to each other is not so much a question of possession as it is a question of connection. We belong to each other because God has brought us together, connecting us to one another through and in Christ. Without such vital, life-giving connections, there is no body. None of us would regard as a body a collection of body parts warehoused in proximity to each other yet lacking vital, life-giving connections.

If we are in no sense the body of Christ apart from these connections, then perhaps we should reflect on the *character* of these connections. How does Scripture talk about them? How are they created and sustained? Paul argues in several places that these connections are created by God, not least by God's complementary gifting of the body of Christ. In other words, God has given each member of the body distinct but vital gifts that the rest of the body requires for its health. In short, God has so created the body that each member needs the others. This means that the very character of the body as ordained by God is rooted in mutual service. I need what the other body parts contribute to the health and well-being of the body, just as they need what I

offer. God has so arranged the life of the body that none of us can secure our own well-being, just as no foot (or other body part) can establish or sustain itself. We need each other.

If we remember that politics is the practice of ordering a people's life together, then contained within Paul's understanding of the giftedness of the body of Christ is a profoundly different politics. This people's life is not ordered around the belief that their gifts are their own. On the contrary, Paul insists that the gifts given to the church have been given "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph 4:12-13).

The New Testament image of the body of Christ radically challenges our contemporary notions of self-sufficiency and autonomy. By being grafted into the body of Christ, Christians have been freed from the burdensome requirement of securing our own well-being and from the isolation that inevitably accompanies an overemphasis on autonomy. As a result, Christians have been empowered for mutual service, which includes the giving and receiving of acts of kindness.

Listening to one another. If Christians truly are to function as the body of Christ, we will need to foster stronger and more intimate connections with each other. To do this, we will need to learn to listen. Listening to each other will be greatly facilitated by our no longer viewing each other as threats to our well-being. Within the dominant culture that emphasizes self-sufficiency and autonomy, there is little reason for us to listen to each other. Why should I listen to you? I don't want to hear about the good things that have happened in your life; they just make me more depressed about my own lack of accomplishment. I don't want to listen to your problems; I have my own. Nor do I care to listen to your advice or admonition; I can take care of my own problems by myself.

But once we are given eyes to see each other as gifts rather than as threats, listening to each other becomes vitally important for our life together. I need to learn to take appropriate pride in your accomplishments, and you in mine, because we realize that neither of us have done this on our own. I need to

listen carefully to your problems, for as a fellow member of the body of Christ your problems are my problems. Similarly, I need to be willing to share my problems as well, since learning to receive acts of kindness graciously is also central to our identity as the body of Christ. Finally, I need to learn to receive your advice or admonishment not as a threat to my self-sufficiency and autonomy but as a gift of God for my own well-being and thus for the well-being of the entire body. Do I really believe that I can learn to hear the voice of God when I cannot even bring myself to listen to the voice of my brother or sister? Even more to the point, is there not plenty of scriptural precedent for a word of God coming through the voice of another person?

Carefully listening to another is itself an act of kindness, and it may sometimes lead to further action on another's behalf. But how will I know what you actually need, or you me, if we do not take the time and effort to really listen to each other? In many ways genuine listening is a little like death, for it requires us to set aside our agendas for the moment in order to be fully present to and for another human being. In so doing we offer ourselves to others as vehicles for God's presence and grace. Like each of the fruit of the Spirit, it is this other-directedness that makes kindness part of the spectrum of God's love that we are called to reflect to the world.

In the final analysis this lack of genuine other-directedness may be the primary limitation of "random acts of kindness." Too often such acts encourage me to do little more than create opportunities for me to feel good about having done something "kind" for somebody else, regardless of what they really needed. Such acts usually demand little of me—no listening, no discerning what is needed and no time-consuming involvement with another person's life. Similarly, such acts neither create nor sustain any long-term relationship; the anonymity of my action coupled with its randomness guarantees that. Instead, I enjoy a certain "buzz" from having done something unusual and unexpected. To the degree to which such acts draw me out of my everyday preoccupation with myself in order to attend to the lives of other people, we might identify such acts as either precursors to acts of kindness or as a kind of dwarf species of kindness. However, to the degree to which such acts continue to place my own ego and its desire for attention and "strokes"

at the center, we would be more honest to identify such fruit as stemming from some other spirit than that which animated the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions and Practical Suggestions

- Reflect on your own life and the way you narrate your own life story. How important are others to that story? To see this more clearly, conduct the following exercise: try to imagine what it would be like to narrate your life story without reference to anyone else other than yourself. How much of your story could you tell? How interesting would it be? What does such an exercise tell us about our alleged self-sufficiency and autonomy?
- Do a New Testament word study of the Greek reciprocal pronoun *allelon*, which is translated into English most commonly as "one another." Note how frequently the New Testament writers exhort believers to do something (admonish, comfort, do good, be kind and so forth) to or for "one another." You may be surprised how many New Testament exhortations are couched in such language, a language that makes no sense unless people understand themselves to be in relationships of interdependence.
- Take some time to reflect on the New Testament metaphor of the body of Christ. How does this image illuminate your own experience as a Christian? In what ways do you believe you are vitally connected to other members of the body? Have there been times when you have sensed more of a connection with the body than others? What do you think accounted for this sense of connection?
- Carefully consider the gifts and abilities you believe you have been given. Did you discover these gifts completely on your own, or did you come to see them by interacting with other people who identified and affirmed your abilities? In what ways have you been led to believe that these are your own, that they are yours to exploit for your own benefit and gain? What would it mean for you to begin to think of these gifts as existing both for the edification of the body of Christ and for the benefit of the reign of God?
- Reflect on the relationships that you most cherish and admire. In what ways are they characterized by interdependence? If Christians are to nurture

such relationships in a society that works hard to deny their importance, we might begin by noting the ways in which our lives are already woven together. As noted earlier in this chapter our lives are already intricately woven into the lives of many other people, even if we rarely notice. Granted, few of these relationships touch us at our core, because most of them are sustained at superficial levels that operate independently of who we are. That is, my life may be connected in some complex way to all those who produce my breakfast cereal, but most of them care little whether I purchase it or my neighbor does. Nevertheless, we do well to notice these connections, even if they are superficial, because they remind us of how little of our lives can be described as in any way self-sufficient or autonomous.

Beyond that we need areas of our lives where we nurture cooperation and where such cooperation brings us into closer relationship with one another. What would it mean, for example, for Christians to think of their work (whatever shape that takes) as service to others rather than as simply a means to secure their own (or their family's) livelihood? What would it mean for us to consider *other* people's work as service to us? Most of us are surrounded everyday by people who perform acts of service for us. We could (and largely do) ignore them as simply doing what they have to do in order to survive. But why not rather express our gratitude to them in some small way that acknowledges that our lives are richer because of them?

□ Finally, we come to the matter of listening. Many of us would do well to admit that one of the biggest impediments to our listening to other people is our incessant busyness. We are so wrapped up in our own lives, going here and there, doing this and that, that we find it difficult even to hear other people, let alone truly listen to them. To address this matter, we might try implementing something like the centuries-old Benedictine practice of *ratio*. *Ratio* involves stopping one thing before beginning another, with the hope of being more fully present to those with whom one is engaged. This might involve, for example, my turning off the radio five or ten minutes from home in an attempt to focus my thoughts and attention on the needs of my spouse and children, so that when I walk through the door I am not preoccupied with my own agenda but am more fully present to and for them. It might

mean focusing my thoughts on my students as I walk from my office to my class—rather than mulling over the last article or book that I have read—so that I am prepared to be truly present for them when I walk into the classroom. In short, most of us will find it difficult to be kind if we have not learned to listen, and yet we will not learn to be good listeners as long as our minds and hearts are focused exclusively on ourselves. The practice of *ratio* encourages us to create a space in our lives so that we may welcome in another.

As the quotation at the beginning of the chapter suggests, God does not parcel out kindness by using some kind of formula that offers blessings in proportion to our worthiness. God is “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked,” and Jesus urges *us* to offer this same kind of mercy-filled kindness. As Jesus noted, most of us find it easier to be kind to those who are kind to us, yet such “kindness” reflects little of the light from God’s kingdom. As people empowered by God’s Spirit, we are called to reach out in kindness to our neighbors—those who are easy to love and those who are not—as a channel for God’s grace and presence. Toward that end we might do well to reflect on the following quotation from Martin Luther, who urged his fellow Christians in the sixteenth century to view their freedom in Christ as an opportunity to benevolently serve their neighbors:

We should devote all our works to the welfare of others, since each has such abundant riches in his faith that all his other works and his whole life are a surplus with which he can by voluntary benevolence serve and do good to his neighbor. . . . He ought to think: “Although I am an unworthy and condemned man, my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true. Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart, and with an eager will do all things which I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches? I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ.” . . . Who then can comprehend the riches and the glory of the Christian life? It can do

all things and has all things and lacks nothing. It is lord over sin, death, and hell, and yet at the same time it serves, ministers to, and benefits all men. But alas in our day this life is unknown throughout the world; it is neither preached about nor sought after; we are altogether ignorant of our own name and do not know why we are Christians or bear the name of Christians. Surely we are named after Christ, not because he is absent from us, but because he dwells in us, that is, because we believe in him and are Christs one to another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us.²

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Eph 4:30-32)

SEVEN

Cultivating Goodness in the Midst of Self-Help

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. (Eph 5: 8-11 NIV)

Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. . . . The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. (Mt 12:33, 35)

Those who have been to their local bookstore in the last several years know that one of the fastest growing sections is the area marked "self-help." Here one can find a wide range of titles that offer readers advice on how to live more satisfying lives. Many focus on unlocking hidden resources or uncovering debilitating fears, while others offer some technique for getting more out of life. While browsing through two local bookstores, I compiled the following list of representative titles from their "self-help" sections:

Finding Joy: 101 Ways to Free Your Spirit and Dance with Life
The Family: A Revolutionary Way of Self-Discovery
Unlimited Human Potential . . . A New Definition
Unlocking the Secrets of Your Childhood Memories