

## “A Legacy of Kindness”

Rev. David Gregory

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Pentecost 12



### Readings

Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.

~ Excerpt of *Romans 12:1-2* from *the Message* by Eugene Peterson

I'm trying to make sure I stay a loving person, opposing things that make me angry, and not be a perpetually angry person—but it's difficult to tell when you're swimming in so much enmity every day.

I want to leave a legacy of kindness, a compassionate wake in the waters of this world so that other people who are similarly fatigued by the hatred they encounter here, find rest in me. Maybe that's all any of us can do: perpetuate decency and goodness and generosity in the infinitesimal space of the next choice in front of us.

~ John Pavlovitz from the blog *Stuff That Needs to Be Said*,  
in a post entitled “I'm Really Tired of Hatred”

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From the outset of the pandemic we have been producing these experiences of music, imagery, and spoken words, hoping that we would not only hold our congregation together, but that we might also introduce ourselves and our message to a larger audience. We have friends from our local region as well as from across the country who regularly join us now, and for that we are most grateful.

We originally thought this would be a short-term situation, that the curve of infections would be flattened, that we would gradually and carefully begin to reopen our building. This of course has not been the case. At the moment I am recording this message, we are in our sixth month of social distancing, and nearly 175,000 of our fellow U.S. citizens have died as a result of this pandemic. Unfortunately, there is no end in sight.

The virus has proven to be just as stubborn as the general populace, some of whom continue to defy science, common sense and common decency. We have maintained all along that love for God and neighbor means that we refrain from as much risk as we possibly can, and care for one another as we would want to care for ourselves. We are not the kind of people who throw their cares to the wind and then ask God for some miraculous protection, not when there is an abundance of medical and scientific wisdom from which we can draw as we live and make daily decisions. So we will keep on keeping on, hoping for the best by doing our best.

This is the broad view of things, but I'll admit to you today that my personal reality isn't always quite that philosophical. The truth is, I'm tired. That is not to say that I'm not getting enough sleep. I am sleeping better and longer than I did before the pandemic. Staying at home contributes to healthier rhythms than I have enjoyed for much of my life. When I say I'm tired, what I really mean to say is . . . I am weary. I don't feel worn out as much as I feel worn down.

A few weeks ago, Michelle Obama referred to this feeling as her "low grade depression," and perhaps her vulnerability might give us permission to say that we could be feeling the same way. The human, scientific, and economic challenges brought on by the pandemic feel relentless. The level of racism, hatred, and vitriol in our public discourse is exhausting. What has become a popular disdain for truthfulness, integrity, and the rule of law make it feel like the foundations are crumbling underneath us. The damage being done to the earth and the inevitable results of climate change are alarming, to say the very least. In our part of the world, the skies are full of toxic smoke, with months of our dry season yet ahead of us.

The widening flow of disinformation and propaganda keeps us divided into camps based upon who we are, where we've come from, who we love, and where we get our information. The list of these conditions goes on and on, and I dare say that the more we place ourselves at the effect of those conditions, the wearier we will become. And the wearier we become, the more susceptible we are to greater forms of disinformation. This should never come as a surprise. The familiar words of Paul's letter to the Romans warn us not to be conformed to the world around us, but rather to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Eugene Peterson's take on that phrase says, "Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking." The truly vulnerable person will admit that they cannot swim in a sea of hatred and not be affected by it. As an old-time preacher used to say, "When you drop a glove into a mud puddle the mud puddle doesn't become 'glovey.'"

It is difficult to read a reputable newspaper or to listen to a trusted news source without feeling sullied at times by the simple truth of what is. That's why the words of Paul remind us not to become so well adjusted to all of it. In other words, when the world around us with all of its challenges and conditions starts to feel "normal," we have a deeper problem on our hands. We've become desensitized in alarming ways. Things that were once an outrage become commonplace, and the din of falsehood is so constant and so loud, that the noble act of truth-telling is nearly impossible to discern.

Our friend John Pavlovitz, author, preacher, blogger, and cultural commentator is becoming a sort of life-line for us. I keep talking about him because he continues to say the things we're all thinking, with his unflinching challenges to the duplicity of the religious right, his scathing reviews of our political life, and his revolutionary ideas about what Christianity really is at its very root. Recently, I came upon a post of his from several months ago entitled "I'm Really Tired of Hatred," and it immediately caught my interest. The words, "I'm really tired" quite literally leapt off the page at me. "That's how I feel," I thought, "really tired. Really, really, really tired." And if I were struggling to figure out the source of that weariness, he helped me by putting it right in the title. I'm really tired of hatred. Like him, I'm trying to stay a loving person, opposing the things that make me angry, without being a perpetually angry person. I want to leave a legacy of kindness that helps others find rest. I want to perpetuate decency and goodness and generosity. "But," he says, "it's difficult to tell when you're swimming in so much enmity every day." In other words, it's a really easy thing to become so desensitized to the hatred around us that we have trouble noticing it until the love has drained from our souls. He says that there is an infinitesimal space between us and the next choice we will make. Every moment is a segment in which we can express our conscious intention to be kind, to be truthful, to be loving. We're often encouraged to take our lives one day at a time. Mr. Pavlovitz is saying that it's really more about one moment at a time.

I cannot begin to say where the coming days will take us. I can only hope that the better angels of our nature will prevail. I do not know whether the cultural cesspools will begin to drain away or if they will overflow. All I can do is choose love in this moment, and in this one and this one and this one, and the one after that. If you or I can do that, this legacy of kindness can spread like a magnificent anti-virus. And if we're not there yet, it's ok to say when we're struggling. It's ok to ask for help. It's wonderful to find a listening ear, an outstretched hand to guide us into what feels strange and new to us.

The unknown author of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews said "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." In other words, let's help each other through the crises of our daily lives. If you ever wondered what church is for, this is it.



*The Good Samaritan*  
Annie Henrie Nader