

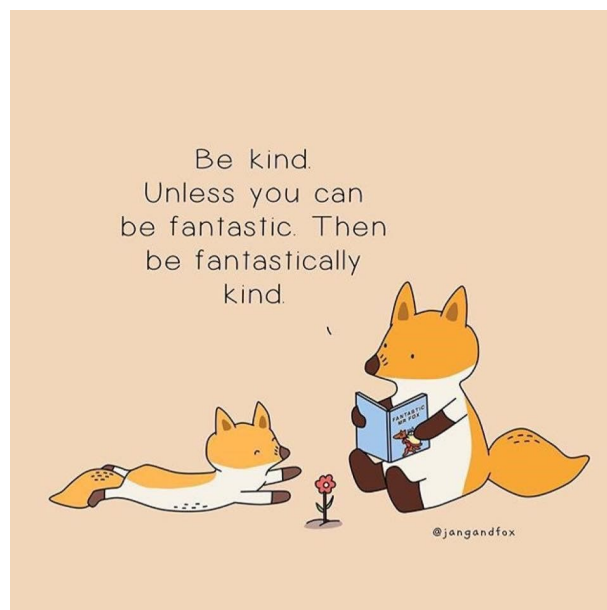
June 30, 2019
Fantastically Kind
Annette Hill Briggs
Romans 5:1-11

By faith we have been made acceptable to God. And now, because of our Lord Jesus Christ, we live at peace with God. ² Christ has also introduced us to God's undeserved kindness on which we take our stand. So we are happy, as we look forward to sharing in the glory of God. ³ But that's not all! We gladly suffer, because we know that suffering helps us to endure. ⁴ And endurance builds character, which gives us a hope ⁵ that will never disappoint us. All of this happens because God has given us the Holy Spirit, who fills our hearts with his love.

⁶ Christ died for us at a time when we were helpless and sinful. ⁷ No one is really willing to die for an honest person, though someone might be willing to die for a truly good person. ⁸ But God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful.

⁹ But there is more! Now that God has accepted us because Christ sacrificed his life's blood, we will also be kept safe from God's anger. ¹⁰ Even when we were God's enemies, he made peace with us, because his Son died for us. Yet something even greater than friendship is ours. Now that we are at peace with God, we will be saved by his Son's life. ¹¹ And in addition to everything else, we are happy because God sent our Lord Jesus Christ to make peace with us. [Contemporary English Version]

My first sermon title for today was "Gracefully Wrong." Then I came up with sermon #2 with the title "Fantastically Kind." The CEV uses "undeserved kindness" to translate *charis*. We have been given the fantastic, undeserved kindness of God. What shall we do with it? That is for sermon #3.



You may have grown up in a house like mine, where *work came before play; homework and chores before TV; kids old enough to drive are old enough to get a job*. I'm an oldest child. If you know much about birth order, you know I took to these notions like a fish to water. I had a paper route from the time I was 12 until I was 15 – *The Louisville Courier Journal*. Before high school was over I had a résumé that included full-time babysitter, fast-food taco maker, and grocery checker.

Until well into adulthood, the best hourly money I ever made was at the hardest work I'd ever done: detasseling seed corn in the Mississippi Delta. Farm work. I got sunburned and mosquito bitten. I learned to watch for snakes curled and sunning on cornstalks. I wanted to quit after the third day. My dad wouldn't let me.

He'd say things like, "So you think you are too good to do farm work? Work is the price we pay for the kind of life we want, and being prepared to work hard is what keeps a person safe and fed and healthy." Are those things true? Sometimes. Not for everyone, everywhere.

And he was altogether right in the ways he meant to be. But I overlearned. I let his good lesson on temporal things infect my understanding of all things, including faith. The lesson that we must earn everything we have isn't useful in matters of faith. When it comes to faith, it's worse than *un-useful*. It can be sinister, actually.

There is such a thing as sinister theology. We know Paul is trying to lay a new foundation of loving, full inclusiveness in the church. But before he can do that, he had to rip up an old one that is already deeply rooted, that was religious for some (Jews) and is culture today for others (Americans).

And the one footer of that foundation of deeply-rooted segregation and prejudice is this notion that the undeserved kindness of God, delivered to us in Jesus Christ, is something we deserve, something we can earn.

Once upon a time I coveted having my own Le Creuset cookware. Purple Le Creuset. Every now and then I'd see it at *Goods for Cooks* and just sigh. It's obscenely expensive, so I never got any. Then, one day in 2010 a woman I didn't know e-mailed me and asked me to call her. I thought it must be a scam, but I did anyway. She told me a story. Her company was trying to clear old claims and she'd tracked down my e-mail. Because in 1953 my grandmother had bought a \$1000 life insurance policy on my mother who was 18 years old. And single. And pregnant. My grandmother made herself the beneficiary.

My grandmother is a story in herself. I'm sure she never told my mother this. 57 years later, I got a check that I cut into four. My siblings and I received an undeserved kindness from my grandmother and the Slovene National Benefits company of \$460 – with

which I bought two pieces of purple Le Creuset. My son uses the dutch-oven nearly every time he cooks. Amazing story, right?

Now, suppose instead of using it, I put that cookware in my garage, unopened? That I read about it every day and sang songs about it once a week? That I prayed God would see me fit to use it someday? You'd probably call me crazy, eh?

But bring that crazy to church, and we call it – what? Faith. Discipleship. Are you with me, friends? I cannot tell you how many blocks I've been around trying to figure out what to preach. This is all I have. Paul says *we have already been made acceptable to God, and now, because of Jesus Christ, we live at peace with God.*

Until we get that, friends, about ourselves, no wonder we cannot open our hearts and lives to others. Either we live our life as this world describes – something to be pursued and earned – or we live the lives God has given us, fully, down to our toes, accepted, and at peace with God forever.

My new favorite song this week is called "Too Good." It says, *It may be too good to be understood, But it's not too good to be true.* It's not too good to be true.

Would you pray with me?