

# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from August 9, 2009

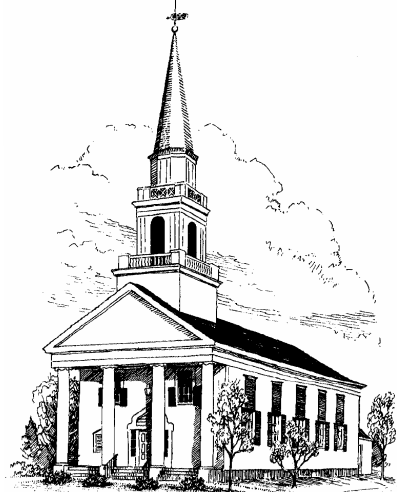
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

### “Intentional Acts of Kindness”

Scriptures:

Psalm 34:1-8

Ephesians 4:25-5:2



A few years back, my friend Amy was pregnant with her first child. She went to visit her sister in Pennsylvania and while she was there, her sister served for dessert a popular brand of ice cream from the grocery store; the flavor was orange sherbet with dark chocolate chips. Amy had never tasted that flavor before and she absolutely loved it. In fact, we think, owing to her hormonal condition, she probably loved it more than she usually would, and actually consumed quite a bit of it while visiting her sister in Pennsylvania. When she arrived back home in Massachusetts, she went straight to her grocery store, directly to the freezer aisle and found the display of that brand of ice cream, but was very disappointed to see that orange sherbet with dark chocolate chips was not there. Odd, she thought, because her sister’s grocery store in Pennsylvania had multiple half-gallons of the stuff behind their freezer door. The store clerk shrugged and said no, he wasn’t aware of the existence of that flavor. She subsequently visited another couple of grocery stores in her area, and while they did carry that brand of ice cream, no one carried, nor had heard, of that flavor.

So Amy e-mailed the ice cream company, told of her discovery of the flavor in Pennsylvania and her strong urge for the orange sherbet with dark chocolate chips, perhaps due to her condition, and her disappointment in her inability to find it in a store near her. The company e-mailed her back and explained their test-marketing plan of introducing new flavors in specific markets around the country and apologized for it not being available in Massachusetts. And, by the way, what was the grocery store she frequented the most in her area? Amy wrote back and said thank-you and told the company the name of her grocery store.

She was surprised and quite pleased with this prompt and courteous reply from the ice cream company and even mentioned to me how refreshing it was to write to a big company in another part of the country and hear back so quickly.

A few days later Amy received another e-mail from the company informing her that they had shipped some of the orange sherbet with dark chocolate chips to her area store to her attention and that she need only see the Store Manager and he would direct her to the ice cream. Well, she was delighted and was very impressed with the company’s action. On her way home from work that day, she stopped by the store, sought out the Manager and he ventured out back to the storage area and returned to meet Amy with a full case of orange sherbet with dark chocolate chips with her name on it, with instructions from the company for it to be given to her at no charge, along with the message that they hoped this would hold her over until they began distributing that flavor in Massachusetts or until she delivered her baby, whichever came first!

I remember Amy saying to me that this generous gesture had restored her faith. And as we read

a portion of Paul's letter to the Ephesians this morning, I am reminded of this ice cream story because of its intentionality. The customer service representative at the other end of the e-mail made an intentional decision to do more than just issue a polite reply. Now those of you in sales and marketing know that this kind of gesture is worth it. The nominal expense of a case of ice cream will go a long way in securing a loyal customer, and her testimony will be repeated to many others. So the cynics among us may say simply that the company really acted in its own interest.

But Paul's letter may just get us thinking a little more deeply about this, because the company saw Amy's interest and their interest as the same thing. Paul writes: so then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. We are members of one another. We are all one in Christ. We Ephesians are a newly baptized faith community who have shed our old ways and have put on Christ and we have *decided* not to behave the way we used to because Jesus has been revealed to us as the Anointed One, the Messiah, our Savior who died for our sins, who forgave us, and we are born anew. We speak the truth to each other because we are one with each other through Christ.

Imagine the good news about Jesus in the first century being so brand new! Imagine the excitement of the truth of his Resurrection being passed on by those who had been the closest to it. Imagine the inspiration filling you up, finally feeling the Holy Spirit in you and around you, saying a heartfelt YES to Baptism, and coming up out of that water a brand new person in Christ. Amen! Praise God!

Then what? In those days, going back to the chores, the fields, and, yes, meeting together again periodically to share the bread and the cup, but maybe slowly forgetting that first glow of the knowledge of Christ, when you loved the world and everyone in it and saw each other in a new light as brothers and sisters in Christ, beloved children of God. And now that Gentile neighbor from up the road is showing up at our gatherings and isn't all that familiar with our Hebrew scripture and some of our customs. And I know she's baptized, too, and has accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior, and we're all supposed to be one, but you know she really doesn't fit in, and she kinda drives me crazy, and I can't help but get a little annoyed with her and, yeah, I suppose I was short with her last week, but so-and-so actually raised his voice to her in anger.

Eventually, we lose that glorious intention to be more than just polite, to truly embrace one other, to look past our human divisions to our oneness in Christ, because it's hard to stay there. Eventually, our physical distance from our own Baptisms, our fading memories of the newness of the Resurrection, the evolution of our culture have landed us in a place where we honor and delight in the notion of sporadic random acts of kindness, when we are called to intentionally act out kindness as a way of life.

Why is it that intentionally good customer service is always such a surprise? Why is it that so many of us walk away from a new introduction, exclaiming, "Wow! He's really nice!" as if we didn't think he would be? Why do we *not* expect to be let out in traffic? Why do we tense up and brace for conflict almost every time we need to discuss something with a potential for disagreement? Why is not the *default* position one of love and acceptance instead of mistrust? Why don't we, like the other bumper sticker says, expect miracles?

Well, we're human and we forget. And we're busy with all the activities in our lives, noble and important and good activities. But sometimes so busy that all we can manage is to react instead of being intentional, and our idea of being Christian gets watered down to "have a nice day" rather than the purposeful, proactive carrying out God's mission in our world.

Paul's advice? Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. And we are reminded to think about Jesus and to remember how he

lived among us. A very busy man, when you consider the work he wanted to accomplish in three short years. He could have been quite preoccupied with his own stuff as he contemplated what awaited at the end of his ministry, not at all something to look forward to. He could have been all wrapped up in these disciples not getting it quick enough, the crowds following him around, pressing in on him, asking him questions like do we have to go back into the womb to be born again, the Pharisees challenging and testing and mistrusting at every turn. And somehow, we don't have a vision of Jesus rushing around, snapping out answers, or appearing hassled or harried or in a tizzy or breezing through villages with a smile on his face saying, "have a blessed day!"

We read about his intentionality, his careful, deliberate words, all spoken for building up, all giving grace to those who heard. We read about his withdrawing to pray, and his slow and methodical and purposeful walk *toward* conflict, *toward* sinners, *toward* those who were different, patiently preparing the disciples for when he would be gone, bidding us all to love one another as I have loved you.

Love one another as I have loved you. On purpose, despite your flaws, despite your misunderstandings and jumping to erroneous conclusions, despite your judging others when that's my job, despite your warring and divisiveness, despite your walking by, or worse, walking away from those who need my love through you. In fact, I have loved you *because* of all that. Love one another as I have loved you—deliberately and intentionally.

Several of you have spoken to me of a prayer that one of your former pastors wrote for you for dealing with the bridge, for finding patience when the traffic is stopped and temporarily snarled every hour from May to October. And I must say there have been days over these past several weeks when I could have used that prayer and when the words I muttered were in stark contrast to what Paul is suggesting in his letter this morning. I was sharing my frustration with someone recently and was met with an answer from a Christian: I welcome that traffic jam. I look forward to driving downtown when the bridge goes up. It gives me an opportunity to be kind to people.

May we intentionally look for opportunities to be tenderhearted, to be kind, to be forgiving and to live in love, for we are members of one another. May we be inspired by those who love as Christ loves. May we grow to expect miracles. Amen.

