



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“It Only Takes a Spark”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Matthew 5: 13-16; I John 4: 7-21

June 1, 2025

Today brings us to week four of five in our spring series. We’ve been exploring little snippets of that song that our Uker-ists shared with us back at the beginning of May (which we will return to, with them, in our Celebration Sunday service next week). For those who are interested, we did include the full lyrics to that song in this morning’s worship order but allow me to recap the first few weeks.

- We started with the opening verse of the song and owned that the cornerstone of leaning into the light of God requires an understanding that we’re not always going to perceive the ways of God. Leaning into the light of God means trusting that God is at work, even when all evidence suggests that God is not.
- We moved on in week two to the question of kindness. No matter the strife, the angst, the hurt, the pain that someone may have caused, our faith reminds us to seek not vengeance or retribution, but to ask first the question of how we enter into that circumstance – into any and every circumstance – with kindness.
- Then, in week three, we looked towards the promise of the Holy Spirit and were reminded of the glories that God can achieve even through the frail efforts of we, his beloved and yet broken children.

Today, I want to build on those concepts a bit more and explore a single line in the song that suggests that, ‘Every kindness, large or slight, shifts the balance towards the light.’ Aesop, in his fable “The Lion and the Mouse,” says it another way, “No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.” Now, if you really look at that particular fable there is something of a karmic undertone to that quote that is not my point for today, but I do wonder if we too quickly forget that the little things do, in fact, matter.

Allow me to share a story...

It was probably 17-18 years ago that Marilyn, facing grave illness, had been hospitalized. She and her family knew that her time was coming to an end, the shift to hospice care had taken place, and I made my way to the hospital for a visit. We sat together for a while and chatted. We shared stories. We talked about her life and legacy. We talked about her family. We talked about her faith. Then, as our time came to a close, I asked if I could share a prayer before I

departed. I leaned over her bed a bit, we held hands, and I began to pray for her comfort, her peace, and for God's strength with both her and the family in the days to come.

We shared in this prayer for a couple of minutes, I said 'Amen,' and I began to straighten up from and withdraw my hands from hers. Suddenly, her hands gripped mine ever more tightly. She physically drew me back into that time of prayer, my mind started spinning as to what she needed. Did she want to sit in silent prayer together? Was she just not quite ready to let go? Was she looking for me to say more? Was there something particular she was longing to hear? I tried to pull myself back into the sacred space with my mind racing about what it was I could do to pastor to her in that moment, and before I could even form a cohesive thought, it was her voice that broke the silence. She began to lead our prayer together. That was a unique and stunning enough experience in its own right, but it was the prayer she shared that hit me like a ton of bricks. Her prayer? It was for me! She prayed for my ministry. She prayed for my family. She prayed with gratitude for the time we had shared and prayed for God's blessings on the countless still-to-be-discovered pastoral moments that I would encounter in my life. I can barely come up with the words to describe how I felt in that moment.

It was, in fact, just a few days later that I received a call from her son and rushed to the hospital in the middle of the night to be with them as she passed. We prayed again. We cried. But, all the while, I remained overwhelmed with how to process that moment. Marilyn was both literally and figuratively on her death bed. She was in her final days, bordering on her final hours. She was saying goodbye to friends and family. She was facing all of the sorrow and grief that – no matter how strong our faith – we face as consider leaving our loved ones behind. And still, she prayed for me! I was there for her, but she prayed for me! It was just words. It wasn't some grand gesture of great magnitude. It wasn't some enormous act of self-sacrifice that plastered the stars with the wonders of her benevolence. It was a handful of sentences. It was a couple of minutes. And yet, those few words, that couple of minutes, from a woman whose heart still cared for me when her own life was on the brink, brought me into the presence and glory of God's love as have few moments of my life.

"Every kindness, large or slight, shifts the balance towards the light." I saw the light that night, and all it took was a few sentences, a few minutes, from a woman who had every right to be worried about so much, but who took time for me. Comments such as focusing on 'simple acts of kindness' can feel trite and overworn at times, but I do sometimes wonder how often we realize that we don't have to be able move mountains to move mountains.

I found myself, as I reflected on this theme for this week, drawn back to Paul's familiar words in I Corinthians 13. Most of us know the heart of the passage that starts in verse 4, "Love is patient; love is kind;" and so forth. We spent the entire summer on that passage last year. This week, however, it was the opening words of that 13th chapter that stood out to me.

"If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing." (I Corinthians 13: 1-3)

It's from there, of course, that Paul gets into that litany of what love ought to look like. What I find compelling about these opening words in the context of our reflections today, however, is that they are a reminder that it is not the grandeur of the act, but the magnitude of the love behind it, that matters. As Paul sets the stage for his soliloquy on love, he does so by reminding the Corinthians that it's not about miraculous deeds, incomprehensible achievements or unimaginable feats – it's about the heart, the love, that drives the act in the first place.

I think we look towards passages like those familiar words of Matthew 5, reminding us to be the light of the world, and we can make sense of them. We get it. And those words are deepened when we turn to passages like our reading from I John that reminds us that God's love lives through us and that it is in us that others see God's love. We understand, cognitively at least, the notion of living out our love for others as Jesus lived out his love for us. But, how do we live up to that?

- God loved us so much that he sent Jesus.
- Jesus performed miracles.
- Jesus healed countless people.
- Jesus fed thousands with just enough for a few.
- Jesus walked on water to reach Peter.
- Jesus climbed upon the cross that we all might reach God.

I think we start to get caught up in the grandeur of it all, and we start to think that our love needs to look like that. But, you know what else Jesus did?

- He called tax collectors to be his closest friends.
- He welcomed children in the streets when others wanted to send them away.
- He sat with the sinners and the untouchable.
- He invited the unwanted.
- He called Zacchaeus out of that tree.
- He knelt and washed the feet of the disciples.

Think about it... None of those things, in and of themselves, are especially noteworthy. They were simple moments. They were small acts. They were a few minutes here and a few words there. None of those moments met any standard of some magnificent gesture of loving kindness, and yet some 2,000 years later we remember them, we talk about them, and we learn from them. Why? Because, individually they may not meet any standard of some magnificent gesture of loving kindness, but strung together in a story they paint a picture of a compassion, a heart, and a loving spirit that breathed new life into countless places and circumstances by means of one simple act after the next.

I think the notion of being the light of God to others as Jesus has been for us – of being the light of the world – of allowing the world to see God through us – can all too readily send us down that path of overlooking the wonder of the small things. There may be moments for those grand gestures. There may be times that call for that profound sacrificial love that was seen and known in Jesus. The truth, however, is that most of life doesn't call for that.

- Most of life is about stopping to hold the door for the person coming 10-15 seconds behind you.

- Most of life is leaving room for that guy to merge even though he pushed it to the very last minute.
- Most of life is making a few dozen cookies for St. Ben's, or going downstairs to bag lunches for Repairers.
- Most of life is taking the time to call that friend you haven't heard from in a while just to make sure they're ok.

There may be times that call for that profound sacrificial love that was seen and known in Jesus. The truth, however, is that most of life doesn't call for that. The truth is that most of our kindness in life will be moments that never measure to some false standard of that magnificent gesture of loving kindness. Most of life will be one opportunity after the next for those simple, seemingly inconsequential acts of kindness. What we must forever remember, however, is that every kindness, large or slight, shifts the balance towards the light – and no matter how miniscule it may appear to us in any given moment, strung together they paint a picture of a compassion, a heart, and a loving spirit that will breathe new life into countless places and circumstances by means of one simple act after the next.

May that be the light of God this world knows in us!