

The kindness place

By [Beth Merrill Neel](#)

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A few weeks ago a child at church came into worship near tears. Her feelings had been hurt because she perceived that a couple of other kids had purposely excluded her from something. Normally I would probably not have been aware of any of this, but the sad child was my own. She sat down in the front pew and curled herself up into a little ball. It was one of those moments when I decided to be mom and not pastor. I sat with her and cuddled her and tried very hard not to give the other children the stink-eye. By the time the first hymn started she was okay and life went on.

Kids will be kids and I know that when two kids are gathered, fun ensues, and when three kids are gathered, one of them usually ends up feeling left out. I harbor no resentment to the other two—it happens, and some day it might be my kid that does the leaving out, because kids will be kids. But if and when that does happen, I might be in a slight pickle, because I hold fast to the notion that church is a place where you can count on everyone being kind to each other. I want my child to know that and I want every person in every church to know that.

But it might take me a while.

I grew up in a church where I was very involved as a teenager, and church was, for me, a place where I belonged and was welcomed and where everyone was kind—to me, at least; it was in stark contrast to what I often felt in school. My adolescent church experience is part of what led me to ordained ministry and it's definitely shaped my sense of church being The Kindness Place.

Too many people can tell stories of church being anything but The Kindness Place. People get the stink-eye when they sit in “someone else’s” pew. A couple divorces and one of the parties is told to leave. Someone spills their coffee during fellowship hour and is yelled at rather than helped. An LGBTQ person shows up and, while not overtly told they aren’t welcome, receive enough cold shoulders that they decide never to darken that particular church doorway again.

It's not like kindness is difficult. It's not as though it takes a great deal of effort to sit in a different pew for a week, or for always. Kindness is not a finite resource such that when it's gone, it's gone. It is possible to disagree with someone or even to dislike someone and still show that person kindness.

Is kindness the antidote to judgmentalness? Are we unkind because we lack empathy or are generally clueless? Maybe acting in an unkind manner makes us feel powerful. A few weeks ago I snapped at a parishioner (and immediately regretted it) because I was feeling inadequate, which had not been the other's intention at all. I've known a few curmudgeons who are actually quite kind and considerate, so I don't think it's a matter of one's personality.

There's a lot of pain out there that is utterly beyond our ability to erase. Kindness cannot fix it all, but it can be a balm that alleviates some of its deadening force.

Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, "When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people." Maybe I'm just getting old, but I like to think I'm just getting started.

May you experience some kindness today, and may you create some as well.

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