Kindness, kinship, and the boundaries of justice

The virtue of kindness depends on who we see as kin.

by Amy Peterson in the January 29, 2020 issue

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On the last day of the writers' conference, the leader asked us to get into groups of two or three and pray for each other. He also told us to ask the Spirit to give us "a word" for our prayer partner—a word that would encourage the other person and stay with them. My partner was a petite poet a decade younger than I, with wide eyes and dyed hair.

"Amy is kind," she prayed.

My immediate reaction to the word was distaste. It was as if I'd been given a Thomas Kinkade painting when I wanted a Picasso. The term seemed sentimental rather than strong. I wasn't sure I was kind. And I wasn't sure I wanted to be kind.

But it wasn't the first time I'd heard such a term used to describe me. I was twelve and awkward the summer I went to Camp Soaring Hawk, coming out of a horrible

year at a new school, quickly losing the physical confidence I'd had as a child. The other girls in my cabin talked about bodies and boys, things I wasn't ready to talk about.

Near the end of the week, each cabin prepared a performance for the talent show. Our cabin dressed up like the Brady Bunch and sang the TV show's theme song. I was Cindy, the youngest, with hair in curly pigtails, and I felt cute and also like I did not belong to that blended family at all. On the last night of camp, in a cabin ceremony, each camper received a plastic bead. Its color symbolized a character quality or virtue the counselors saw in the camper. When they gave me orange for kindness, I couldn't hide my disappointment.

Orange was my least favorite color, and being cited for kindness felt like an insult rather than an affirmation. Nice was the last thing I wanted to be. I wanted to be brave or wise or funny. Kindness was the bead that you gave to the girl you didn't know, the girl who didn't cause any problems, the girl who didn't do anything memorable, the doormat who faded politely into the background as others hurried over her.

But shortly after that writer's conference, I started reading *The Kindness of God*, by Catholic theologian Janet Soskice. In her examination of the etymology of the word *kindness*, Soskice helped me see it for the first time as a strong virtue rather than a weak one. "In Middle English," she writes, "the words 'kind' and 'kin' were the same—to say that Christ is 'our kinde Lord' is not to say that Christ is tender and gentle, although that may be implied, but to say that he is kin—our kind. This fact, and not emotional disposition, is the rock which is our salvation."

I paused after reading this sentence to try to take it in, to try to peel the sentimental layers off my definition of kindness and replace them with this fact: to be kind meant to be kin. The word unfolded in my mind. God's kindness meant precisely that God became my kin—Jesus, my brother—and this, Soskice said, was a foundational truth about who I was.

For speakers of Middle English, *lord* had a particular meaning—a lord was someone from the nobility, the upper social classes. To say "our kinde Lord" was to say that the difference in social or economic status between peasants and nobility was also erased through Jesus, a Lord of the same "kinde" as all, landowners and peasants alike. Jesus erased divisions that privileged some people over others.

But what did that mean for the people around me? I was happy to be the sister of Christ but less than thrilled to admit kinship with all humanity; that would make me related to that guy wearing too much cologne at the soccer game, the kid who hit my kid at recess, the woman flirting with my husband in the park, the racist troll I blocked on Twitter, the boss who fired me when he found out I was pregnant, the neighbor who did target practice in his backyard when I was trying to sleep. I would prefer not to call these people my siblings. I would prefer to distinguish myself from them, to say I'm not that kind of person. But, in fact, I am exactly that kind: we are kin. If Soskice is right, then practicing kindness requires, at minimum, a willingness to see the image of God in, and to find a point of honest connection with, every person.

While kindness calls on me to see the image of God in all people, I don't think it asks me to treat all my human kin in exactly the same way. Kindness doesn't require me to love the girls in my cabin at camp in the same way I love my siblings (or my parents or husband or children). God gives us particular loves, and it is right for those relationships to be different.

But our particular loves are also dangerous, because we humans can tend to let our good love for our own families blind us to the ways our actions might oppress or hurt those outside our families, those in our wider circle of *imago Dei* kinship. This danger has always been implicit in our practice of kindness.

After reading Soskice I logged onto the *Oxford English Dictionary* website looking for more about the relationship of kindness to kinship. According to the OED, in Old English *kyndnes* meant "nation," or, in legal documents, a right to a title or piece of land based on inheritance. Kindness was a way of maintaining social classes rather than a way of removing barriers between people. Kinship was exclusive, dependent on bloodlines, and kindness was an inheritance, the land you owned thanks to a father. In Old English the upper classes had more kindness—more land, more inheritance—than the lower. Virtue was attached to wealth and to those who were "like us." Kindness wasn't about recognizing the image of God in others but about maintaining one's own image or social status. This hasn't changed, much. I see the same sort of "kindness" practiced in the United States today.

Around the same time I was putting together these etymologies, I read an article about the impact of receiving a financial inheritance (or, in Old English, a kyndnes). In a widely reported study from the Heller Institute at Brandeis University,

researchers Tatjana Meschede and Joanna Taylor looked at the influence of inheritance on black and white college-educated families. When they began their research, they hoped to find that education leveled the playing field—that a college degree could be the solution to the wealth gap between black and white families. Instead, they found education made little difference at all.

What did make a difference? Family inheritance; intergenerational transfer of wealth. “Among college-educated black families, about 13 percent get an inheritance of more than $10,000, as opposed to about 41 percent of white, college-educated families. And about 16 percent of those white families receive more than one such inheritance, versus 2 percent of black families.”

The average amount is also drastically different: more than $150,000 for white family inheritances versus less than $40,000 for black family inheritances. What this means, Taylor explains, is that “black families, even college-educated black families, rarely get a ‘transformative asset,’ a chunk of money that enables you to pay off student loans, purchase a house, or move to a better neighborhood to send your kids to a better school. For white families that’s much more common.”

That trickle-down across generations of white families has a real effect. “The thing about wealth is that it’s sticky,” says Meschede: once you have it, it really sticks with the family. It puts people onto a much better trajectory. And the way wealth is distributed is replicated in each successive generation. When we think about wealth, often we think about our individual standing, but it’s so strongly linked to what’s happening in family networks.

I have tended to think my success, such as it is, is born of my hard work. But reading Meschede and Taylor’s study woke me up. The plain truth is I’ve had all kinds of advantages, including grandparents who paid for my private school tuition, my summer camp, my music classes, my first car, and some of my first international trips. A small inheritance after my grandmother died also allowed my husband and me to pay off our remaining college debt, and so I’ve been able to live most of my adult life debt-free.

Of course, my grandparents themselves worked hard for the money they left me, but they—and their grandparents and their grandparents—worked within a system rigged in their favor. The wealth my grandparents shared with me is money that was accumulated within a structure that favored white people over indigenous people or

black people. But I don't think about this often: it's easy to remain blind to structural injustice when the injustice bends in your favor and when you're working hard for your success anyway. My grandparents' (and parents') kindness and generosity toward me—right and proper ways of expressing particular love—took place within a culture warped by injustice. And while I can be grateful for what I've been given, I have to acknowledge that this matters.

For a long time in America, unkindness was written into our very laws and conventions. White Americans refused to recognize kinship with indigenous people and slaves. White men left their assets only to some of their children: the ones born of their white wives, not the ones born of their slaves. While of course we have always been kin, our bloodlines mixing and mingling from the very beginning, our customs and our laws for most of our nation's history ignored that truth, and so inheritances stayed divided by color lines.

Even once we realize this history, it's easy to pretend that it's only history—that it doesn't affect our lives now. Torri, a woman I met when I began volunteering with a local political organizing group, has helped me realize how recent these cultural changes are, and how our racist history still shapes our contemporary reality. Torri has been researching her family history for years, and she shared some of her findings.

She learned, for example, that one of her ancestors fought for the North in the Civil War. But at a certain point in her research she hit a wall. Her ancestors' names disappeared. Eventually she found them—she thinks—listed without names; based on the location and time period, she believes the next step in her family tree is in a list of "farm equipment." Right there, with shovels and spades, her ancestor is listed: "three-year-old girl." A piece of property. Part of someone else's inherited wealth. Torri remembers her great-grandmother telling stories about her sister, who was a slave. "She had a good master, though," Torri's great-grandmother would say, and Torri, even as a child, would look skeptical. "Her master always made sure there was enough food for them. He would leave it in the pig trough."

The county where Torri and I live is famous for a double lynching that took place in 1930; she is distantly related to one of the victims. It was this lynching that inspired the song "Strange Fruit," and it was as horrific as you might expect: two boys dragged through the bars of their prison cell by a mob and strung up in front of city hall. There's a photo of the event that shows a crowd of white onlookers, one man

pointing, another smiling. The man who took that photo made it into a souvenir postcard. Thousands of copies were sold, and again, a white man profited economically from the suffering of black men. His financial inheritance passed on to his children, while the black families in our community passed down an inheritance of trauma.

The failure of white people to see the image of God in their black and Native American brothers and sisters is the unkindness on which our nation was built. It's an unkindness that has been financially profitable, and because of that white people have often remained conveniently blind to it. Considering the truth about my kinship with all humans invites me to consider what it might mean for me to share my inheritance, to work to make reparations on a personal level even for things like slavery and lynchings, things I am not personally responsible for and can never ultimately make right.

Perhaps we can learn to be kind, to love our particular kin in ways that aren't unkind to outsiders—ways that don't desecrate the image of God in others but that honor it—by looking at the way God loves Israel. Israel is God's particular love, God's chosen nation. But there is nothing in God's love for Israel that hurts or oppresses those outside of Israel. Quite the opposite: Israel is blessed by God in order to be a blessing to the nations. Through Israel, God's *hesed*—the inheritance of loving-kindness that God has for God's children—becomes available to anyone who wants to receive it.

God's vision is of a wildly inclusive family, in which any outsider can become a son or daughter simply by choosing to accept his offer. "And as for the outsiders who now follow me," God says through the prophet Isaiah, "I'll bring them to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. They'll be welcome to worship the same as the 'insiders'" (Isa. 56:6–8, *The Message*). God says the outsiders will have an honored place in God's family and city, "even more honored than that of sons and daughters" (Isa. 56:4–5). God's particular kindness to Israel was also extended beyond Israel, to outsiders like Rahab and Ruth, who were not only added to the family but made integral parts of it.

Being a part of Israel meant being included in Israel's community life, and one practice prescribed for Israel was the practice of Jubilee. Every 50 years debts were to be forgiven and land was to be returned to its original owners, so any economic divides between the rich and the poor that had developed over the course of a

generation would be erased rather than entrenched.

I wonder how I would have felt if I had known any of these things about kindness when I received that orange bead more than 20 years ago. How might I have felt if I had understood that kindness isn't weakness? Kindness has little to do with being blandly nice, being the right kind of person, someone who won't cause any trouble by asking inconvenient questions, someone who willingly accepts the status quo and fills her place in society without troubling the waters. Kindness is, instead, about seeing the image of God in everyone, outsiders and insiders, and learning to love our kin in ways that don't oppress others. Kindness sometimes means breaking boundaries of bloodlines to become family and being willing to have porous borders. Kindness may require the redistribution of wealth as a part of justice. To have this sort of kindness requires real strength.