

August 23,2020
Rev. Jane Florence
Title: Lovingkindness is Giving
Text: Matthew 25: 31-46



Doing for the powerless, the disenfranchised, those who can be of no use to you, those who can do nothing for your quest for success is a mark of lovingkindness. Jesus challenge is to measure our ability to actualize kindness in relation to those who cannot further our goals. The sick, imprisoned , the destitute, the homeless aren't in positions to do us any favor. Those are the one Jesus asks us to serve. Listen with me to his words from Matthew 25: 34-40

³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

During this series, we are learning practices of lovingkindness. I am sharing with you the thirteen attributes of lovingkindness that Rabbi Rami Shapiro gives in his book, *the Sacred Art of Lovingkindness: preparing to practice*. I have mentioned the concepts of narrow mind and spacious mind each week. It seems essential to move into spacious mind in order to be a practitioner of lovingkindness. Narrow mind sees one as separate. It is isolated, often alienated. Scarcity defines the world of the narrow mind. Fear is its primary emotion and anger is its most common expression." You can see how greed, how hoarding for oneself, living in scarcity grows out of narrow mind. Compare that to spacious mind. "Spacious mind sees the self as part of the Whole. Abundance is the hallmark of the world. Love rather than fear is its emotional foundation, and lovingkindness rather than anger is its defining characteristic." These definitions of narrow and spacious mind set forth a key attribute of lovingkindness. Lovingkindness is generous and abundant expression of gratitude. Living in gratitude arises from bringing to our awareness all that we have been given. This week we will start with a practice called Naikan. It is a Japanese word for a reflective practice. Rabbi Rami adapts this practice as a tool to cultivate kindness.

The practice is simple. There are three questions. You can use particularly at the end your day. As you are lying still, waiting for sleep to catch up with you the questions are a review of your day. Your reflection time might be in the mornings instead of at night in which you review your previous day. For our practice this morning, you might reflect back on yesterday. Review your day beginning with the first question, What have I received today? Slow down; review details of your day with care. Maybe you didn't win the lottery. Maybe you didn't get a gift wrapped package with a bow on top, but chances are you received much in your day nonetheless. Did someone hold the elevator for you? Maybe someone showed

you kindness while you were driving such as by letting you into a lane you were trying to move into. Maybe someone sent you a card, a note, an email, a facebook post of encouragement. Perhaps someone helped you find lost keys, put air in your tire, picked up paper towels you dropped in grocery store, helped you with gas, figured out a zoom call? The first step of Naikan is to remember all the small acts of kindness you received in the day.

Gregg Kreck puts it this way, “often we hurry through our day giving little attention to all the ‘little things we are receiving...as we list what we receive , we are grounded in the simple reality of how we have been supported and cared for. The importance of such a list offers a deeper sense of gratitude without a conscious shift of attention to the myriad ways in which the world supports us, we risk our attention being trapped by only problems and obstacles, leaving us to linger in suffering and self-pity.” Shifting our focus -from problems to blessings, generates gratitude.

The second question is What have I given today? The catch is we are going to add to that question, “that was not self-serving in some way.” Question two: what have I given today that was not - in some way- serving my interests? So often we give in order to receive, subtle or overtly. We give to enhance a relationship that might boost us or bank a future favor for us. We give to be seen giving, to boost our reputation. Don’t list in your answers to this question, your actions that will in some way benefit yourself now or in the future. This practice may cause an increase in realizing that most of what we think we are doing for others actually have benefits to ourselves. Ask, what have I given for which I will not benefit? Albert Einstein said, “A hundred times a day I remind myself that my inner and outer life depends on the labors of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the measure as I have received and am still receiving.”

The third question may be more difficult, What troubles and difficulties have I caused today? What demands have I made on others? While you might not think of yourself as a demanding person, unconscious demands of others are woven in our days as well.

Try this Naikan reflection practice today, and every night for a week, or a month. See what comes to your awareness from it. The practice that flows out of Naikan is generosity. Giving to others of our time, money, energy and attention is lovingkindness. The more you discover the giftedness of life, the more you wish to give back to others” Giving to others, puts acts of lovingkindness in our day, and into the world.

Rabbi Rami goes on to speak directly about lovingkindness in terms of money. Now, Rabbi’s don’t give annual stewardship campaign sermons, so I was a bit surprised to find his chapter on giving included his money talk. Several years into my ministry, when I was visiting with a neighboring rabbi during our annual pledge campaign, I mentioned the letters we send requesting pledges. He remarked, hummm. That’s when he told me that they don’t send out pledge cards to their congregation in the Jewish tradition. I was surprised. I asked how did they fund their ministry? How did they set their budget? Maybe he was on to a new church finance plan I needed to know about. He smiled and said, “oh, I send a stewardship letter, but it doesn’t have a pledge card with it. It has a bill for 10% of their income. I tell them what to give each year; I don’t ask.” So, to hear that Rabbi Rami spoke about money was interesting. Rabbi Rami says, “Money is neutral. Money is not good or bad.

How you earn and how you spend your money is a moral issue addressed by many religions. Buddhism, for example, insists upon Right Livelihood which means earning money in a manner that does no harm is essential. John Wesley wrote the same principle in his sermons on rules for the use of money as well. Wesley wrote, “earn all you can” which is

often quoted. That paragraph continues with a stipulation. Earn all you can, he says, as long as you aren't harming your neighbor, his property, or any others. Wesley also reminds his listeners that the reason we earn all we can is to Give all we can. Judaism also holds that products and produce that come from exploited workers is not kosher. It isn't appropriate to consume that which has caused suffering from its production.

Rabbi says, "Whenever I speak about giving money away, someone always objects, "But what if I have no money to spare?" When it comes to generosity not having money to spare is the point. If I have extra cash, money I have no use for, and I give that money to you, I haven't been generous at all. I am simply giving you something I no longer care about. It is when I have to limit my own spending to help you financially that we can truly speak of generosity. If Bill and Melinda Gates donate five dollars to a charity, are they being generous? No. But when they donate millions, that is generosity. When a beggar on the streets of Jerusalem takes a few coins from his pocket and gives it other beggars, that is generosity. It is not the amount per se that matters, but the fact that giving financially impacts the giver in a significant manner."

Jewish temples are supported by their parishioners paying their tithes, but their ministries are also supplemented by the extra giving, the voluntary gifts which go to those in need. These are also expected, as part of faithfulness practices, but this giving is done at the discretion of the giver. Voluntary giving to those not capable of benefiting back: the poor, the hungry, the needy, is called *Tzedakah*. *Tzedakah* is a spiritual discipline that purifies you from the delusion of ownership. Everything you have is a gift from God, or rather it is no loan to you from God. Hence it is not yours to do with as you wish. They believed that a portion of what you receive must be purified from the concept of personal ownership. Narrow mind promotes separateness; spacious mind supports connectedness and generosity. This is done by donating it to the poor. In Islam, failure to do so makes you a thief, holding on to something that does not belong to you. Doing so, however, also purifies the remaining monies for your use.

A Muslim friend explained it further to the Rabbi. While giving purifies the goods, it's real power is to purify the person himself. Selfishness and greed are the great temptations, they pollute the soul. Tzedakah purifies the heart from these traits. In one who receives the gifts, there is no room for envy, greed, jealousy. As they are placed in your hands for gratitude takes place. In the one who gives, feelings of pride, superiority, ego are replaced by feelings of compassion, lovingkindness, and humility. The medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides lists eight levels of tzedakah :

1. giving grudgingly
2. giving less than you should, but doing so cheerfully
3. giving after being asked
4. giving before being asked
5. giving when you do not know the recipient, but the recipient knows you
6. giving when you do know the recipient, but the recipient does not know you
7. giving when both giver and receiver are unknown to each other
8. enabling the recipient to become self-sufficient and no longer need tzedakah

May your practice of bringing to awareness the support and gifts you receive cultivate in you a heart of generosity. May your expressions of generosity bring lovingkindness to life.