

A part of the mythos of Minnesota is a phenomenon known as *Minnesota nice*. People are just *really* nice, or so the perception exists by many who visit the land of 10,000 lakes. Locals there often joke that the niceness that exists is forged by the collective suffering of Minnesotans. If you live through months of below zero weather and summers that can be blisteringly hot and humid, you become acutely aware of our human limits, the overwhelming forces that control life, and, well, why not just be a bit nicer to the next person who has to deal with the same existential bewilderment. Thus, nice, in part, relates directly to suffering.

While this is not a plea to go and find suffering so that we all might be a bit nicer--indeed, a friend once opined, "You don't need to go and look for suffering. It will find you soon enough--it is a brief reflection on how struggle and adversity often possesses an interesting effect on us, moving us, perhaps, a bit closer to kindness and generosity. Yet, it also is a question about why must we wait for suffering to be nice? How about incorporating it as fully as possible in our life, personally and communally and societally and globally.

With the unbelievable images of boats occupying the submerged streets of Houston, the biblical proportions of rain that have fallen, and the displacement of tens of thousands of people in and around Houston, stories abound of ordinary people doing extraordinary things to save others and to help those in need. There are churches and synagogues around the country who have responded to the need in Texas and who will continue to respond with funds, supplies, and human labor to help. (At St. Francis, we will hold a second collection over the next two Sundays to support the relief and recovery efforts by Episcopal Relief and Development.) The suffering of people in Texas at the mercy of this freakish force of nature has brought out the kindness and generosity that is a part, as Abraham Lincoln observed, of the better angels of our nature.

Meanwhile, the suffering continues, but it may not rise to the extreme nature of a Hurricane or other natural disaster, and it goes unnoticed or responded to. Or there are extreme conditions elsewhere, and we are not aware of them or we are overwhelmed by all the need that exists. (Theologian Joseph Sittler called this condition *compassion fatigue*: so much need and the awareness of it in our modern world creating a sense of exhaustion and paralysis.) While flooding was taking place in Houston, over 1000 people died and 40 million were displaced in India due to the flooding by monsoons there. Such statistics are staggering. Questions arise, "What are we to do? How can we help?" And our abilities to respond are often finite, limited. We must make calculated decisions about how and where to use resources.

Yet, I have come to think that we have too easily absented ourselves from important and hard conversations because we have acceded to the myth of scarcity. This worldview believes that there is not enough to help people, and we must keep what we have to help and protect ourselves. It limits kindness because of a limit-focused view of the world. Meanwhile, the reality is that we

live in a world of abundance. We possess *so* much, and we are capable of even more. We pray this truth every week in our prayers. There we say, “The world has the *means* to end extreme poverty. We pray that we will have the *will* to do so.” From this perspective, the issue is not so much resources as it is will. Of course, we have should be prudent and be good stewards of the resources we have been given. However, we should not hold on so tightly to what we have that we lose sight of the reality of our interconnection to others and the larger world, and our call to be kind. We need not be overwhelmed by the task in front of us.

As with so many things, this orientation to the world begins with simple steps that become a way of life. We celebrate Rich Lee this week for his designation as a Hometown Hero for his example of giving to help others learn. He does not consider himself a hero. Just doing what he can to help. That’s it in a nutshell. From simple daily actions that move us more closely to kindness to larger actions born of that repetition and joined with others, we can make a huge impact in the lives of others. As we continue in small and big ways to try and live into the better angels of our nature, the truth remains: others need not suffer to know kindness.