

In defense of niceness

By [David Williams](#)

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One of the more consistent themes amongst my coreligionists is an inveighing against niceness.

Nice people are smarmy, treacle-mired milquetoasts, who do not understand the importance of The Battle. They are weak, dull, and enablers of everything that is wrong.

You don't want a nice church, or so I am led to understand. You want a church that zealously defends the Truth, rooting out the blighted falseness of heretical imperfection. You don't want a nice church. You want a church that demands absolute justice, carefully checking the souls of every person for signs of noncompliance.

Nice people are too comfortable.

So afflict the comfortable, rises the cry, although I'm not quite sure who those comfortable people are. I've not met many people who are really and truly comfortable. Oh, folks might *seem* to be. But open up a soul even the tiniest little bit, and you find anxieties and loss and struggles to find meaning.

Jesus, my coreligionists will often say, was not nice. He said things in anger. He challenged the powers that be. He was willing to present the hard truth, no matter how much that hurt. There's truth to that, to be sure. I encounter that every time he challenges me. But the desire to be edgy, to tear down? Is that the truth of the path? We must speak the truth in love, I am told. Because boy, is the Jesus truth angry and boy, do we love to speak it.

This is a common refrain among those most eager to tell others their failings, most willing to berate and belittle and claim the mantle of Jesus as legitimizing their rage. But rage? Rage makes you weak. Easily guided. Easily duped.

It also blinds you to complexity, because [anger just ain't down with subtlety](#). Anger just likes to hit things.

So I will rise, now, in defense of niceness, because niceness has power.

Take, for instance, the civil rights movement. On the one hand, you had demonstrators, sure. They weren't passive. Dr. King was not shy. Those who followed his gracious lead did not submit to injustice. They were not submissive. But they were *nice*. They were well-dressed, in a way that signified to power that they were good and nonthreatening people. They were politely insistent. When they came to the counter to nicely order their food, they were kind and respectful and patient.

Around them gathered people who were not nice. They cursed and acted out and generally behaved in ways human beings recognize as cruel. They were obviously bullies, picking on nice people.

They dumped food on them. Cursed them. Sicced their dogs on them. Knocked them down with firehoses. Put them in prison.

Killed them. We all saw it, and it was a horror. Why are they doing that to those nice people?

When you are unyielding in your kindness, when you refuse to back away from being decent, it's not simple. Being nice isn't easy. Just as showing compassion isn't easy. And as easy as it is to see kindness as a form of weakness, I'm not sure it is.

It's one of the reasons, boring as it might seem in this ever louder and angrier world, that I think it's so important for a community to excel in kindness. To be nice, God help us.

I tend to think, honestly, that there just has to be space out there in the ecology of congregations for communities that mostly try to be kind to one another and to all those they encounter. Places where kindness and compassion are practiced as the primary thing you do, above and beyond doctrinal purity.

Because the world does not seem to lack for zealots. There seem to be plenty of those.

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