In the winter of 2009, a lake front owner somewhere in the North Country decided to take down a large tree that was near his lake front cottage. He didn’t want to spend any extra money on hiring a professional to take the tree down. Besides, he just got his chain saw fixed, and wanted to try it out. He figured he’d drop the tree to the side yard on a January weekend, cut it up, stack it, and burn the wood in their wood burning stove through the rest of the winter. But things don’t always work out as you expect. Things can change on a dime, especially if you don’t know what you are doing…..

(SHOW VIDEO of man cutting down a tree, it falls wrong way, hits house, rips off porch)

One minute, our lives are fine, all is good, and our house is in order. And in the next minute, the front half of our house has been destroyed by a tree! How fast things can change! And how upsetting those changes can be. For these North Country do-it-yourselfers, you can just imagine themselves thinking, “If only we could go back in time just before we cut that tree down, when our house was still intact. And now, look at what has happened! What’s it going to take, how much will cost, just to have our house put back together again, as it used to be?”

In our worship drama this morning, we meet Sarah, a college student who somehow slipped and fell, and broke her arm. And because of it, her life has been turned upside down. She was working on a degree to be a dental hygienist – a degree that requires students to use their hands to learn their craft. It was such a painful realization for her to suddenly understand that she wouldn’t be able to continue her schooling. How could a simple broken arm be so devastating? She kept reviewing how she might make things work. But the inevitable conclusion kept loaming more and more closely – she will have to withdraw from school.

All of us have dealt with such unexpected and discouraging turns of events. We all have endured terrible disappointments. We all have experienced the carpet being pulled out from under us, or have run into walls that have stopped us in our tracks. How do you cope when these things happen to you? What gives you strength? What helps you adjust and get through it?
What the drama suggests is this: something very simple helps, and that is the kindness of someone who cares. Sarah’s mother knocks on the door. She has just come over with some food and candy to help cheer up her daughter who has her arm in a sling. As Sarah reveals her situation, as well as her irritability and depression, Sarah’s mom more and more becomes Sarah’s cheering section, telling her how she believes in Sarah, that she is not alone, that all these problems, financial and otherwise, have a solution, and that Sarah should not give up on her dream too quickly.

At the end of the drama, there is a simple but touching interchange that expresses volumes. Sarah asks her mother, “What’s that that you brought – shampoo?” “That’s right,” she replies, “Rosemary Mint Shampoo. Thought you might need some help washing your hair.” Sarah replies, “You haven’t done that since I was little.” Sarah’s mom smiles tenderly, and says, “You haven’t let me since you were little.” Sarah’s response to her mother’s proposal to wash her hair is so quick and so simple that you might miss the power of her feelings of gratitude. Sarah’s response is, “I’d like that.”

There is something very holy about us taking care of each other. There is something very sacred about this mother running her fingers through her adult daughter’s hair as she washes it. This is her way of helping and comforting her grieving daughter. She knows she cannot make her daughter’s arm better, or take away the crisis that is leading her to drop out of school. But nonetheless, she knows she can do something. There is something so exceedingly powerful, even divine, about a simple act of kindness, like washing your daughter’s hair when she can’t do it easily by herself.

The scriptures say, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). This is true because the kingdom of God that Jesus preached about is a kingdom of kindness. The essence of God is kindness and love. And so, that is the Spirit that we feel flowing from Jesus, and that is the Spirit we receive from God, and that is the Spirit that God calls us to offer to everyone else.

This is what we do at Emmanuel. We take care of each other. We know that everyone is struggling with something. Some of us have life-threatening medical conditions that we are coping with quietly. Some us have broken family relationships that never seem to heal. Some of us are dealing with an emotionally draining crisis that concerns a loved one. Some of us living under the threat of losing our jobs, or not being able to pay our bills. That is why Emmanuel needs to be a refuge where all of us can come, and where we make the time to care for each other. That is what we all need.

In the 23rd Psalm, we read, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.” Here is a picture of tenderness and kindness. God is our Good Shepherd who is always looking out for us and our welfare, helping us through our dark valleys, and giving us peace beside still waters. God is like Sarah’s mother looking after her daughter who broke her arm. To know God is to know infinite kindness, and to feel God’s presence is to feel infinite tenderness.
However, there is part of us that does not really believe this. We think, “God cannot be that tender and that kind. Nobody is. God must have times when God interrupts his usual kindness and tenderness so that God can punish and condemn bad people.” And if we think that, even for a split second, it does not take us long to start rationalizing that it is therefore OK for us not to be tender and not to be kind toward certain people we do not like or approve of. It does not take long to rationalize that it is OK not to be kind when we are feeling insecure, or when we feel like being aggressive, or when we are upset with somebody else or some other nation. We rationalize that is OK with God that sometimes we suspend our tenderness, and become violent or go to war.

This is a slippery slope in our thinking, going from believing that God is love to believing that God has lapses in tenderness. And as soon as we start sliding down that slope, we enter into a sinful way of thinking that concludes that kindness is just an optional thing – a very nice thing for sure, but an optional thing that we, and God, do only when we are feeling magnanimous or especially patient.

However, when we get thoughtful and prayerful, we know there is only one truth, and one way to think – and that is that God is the Good Shepherd always, not just some of the time. And this means that we are called to be kind and tender always, not just some of the time. Christ calls us to create a world of kindness, because it is something we all need, like food.

Here is an example. A woman named Kathleen wrote about one simple moment of kindness which literally transformed the course of her life. She writes, “I was at the lowest time in my life. My marriage of seventeen years had failed, my seventeen-year-old son had been killed in an accident, and I was about to lose my job.

“I was called in to the director of nurses’ office. She had no reason to support me or do anything but fire me. I deserved to be fired and could have lost my nurse’s license that day, which in my eyes, would have made my failure complete as a human being on this earth. All the evidence against me was presented and I had no defense. I was guilty, totally humiliated, and felt like I had failed myself and my profession.

“She looked at me with such compassion and said, ‘Kathleen, I’m going to believe in you until you can believe in yourself.’ She let me keep my job. She gave me resources and support. She became my mentor and friend. I never understood what motivated her on that day, but I believe that in that simple moment, she changed my path. She started me on my journey back to believing in myself” (Invisible Acts of Power, p. 128).

Kindness is no small thing. It is a sacred power that flows from God. So when you choose to express it, you are mediating the Spirit of God, and you are able to change people’s lives. Why was that Nursing Director so kind? It was her legal right, you might even say it was her moral right, to fire Kathleen for incompetence. Maybe that Nursing Director knew what it’s like to lose a child, or to lose a marriage. Or maybe she just chose to walk in Kathleen’s shoes for a while, and feel her pain and hopelessness. Or maybe a long time ago, this Nursing Director just made a choice that she would be kind and tender to all people, like a good shepherd, because that is what God has always done for her.
Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese poet, once wrote, “Your neighbor is your other self dwelling behind a wall. In understanding, all walls shall fall down. Who knows but that your neighbor is your better self, wearing another body. See that you love him (or her) as you would yourself.” For Christians this truth is fundamental – our neighbor is our “other self” dwelling behind a wall. And when we are in Christ, that wall is broken down, and we learn that we are all connected, all joined together by Christ, into One Body, because Christ died for everyone and loves everyone.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 that when we are in the Body of Christ, we have respect for each person, and that we offer even deeper respect for those, who by the world’s standards, seem inferior. Paul says that we are so connected to our neighbors through Christ, that “when one member suffers, all suffer together; and when one member is honored, all rejoice together.” When we allow ourselves to feel this bond with others, we feel their pain and their burdens, and we naturally feel motivated to ease their burdens, letting them know they are not alone in their struggles. Being kind toward our neighbors who are suffering is no different than being kind toward ourselves when we are suffering. Such simple kindness, when offered, is so sweet and so sacred, and so close to God.

But it takes a special dedication to be kind. Look at all the hoops that Sarah’s mom had to jump through with her daughter. Sarah, at first, was quite unreceptive and a little antagonistic toward most of her mother’s suggestions. But I think Sarah’s mom expected that, so she was not daunted. She had come to her daughter’s apartment armed with a variety of strategies to show kindness and love. She brought food, she brought candy, she brought her own positive attitude, and she brought a bottle of shampoo.

She knew that probably some of those strategies wouldn’t work, but she was pretty sure some would. And that is the point – Sarah’s Mom was committed to bringing kindness and tenderness to her daughter one way or another. Are you that committed to bring kindness to all the people you meet?

God is calling you and me to take care of each other, to be more and more kind toward our neighbor who is in need, toward those who make our lives difficult, toward an irritable co-worker, even toward ourselves when we are less than perfect. God is calling you and me to be more and more tender toward Muslims, toward people who are marginalized or poor, to those who have no health care. God is calling us to be more and more kind to refugees, to the homeless, to those who are stressed in some way, even toward our environment that is presently being damaged by the activity of 7-1/2 billion people. We are called to be unconditionally and infinitely kind, always - just like God.

And that is our pathway to God, if we want to take it. We all have felt the comfort and healing power of people being kind to us, or looking out for us. It is so sweet and so transforming. And we all have this immense power - to be kind, to take care of one another. How are you going to use that power in the remaining days of your life?