

A Simple Act of Kindness

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Fifth Sunday of Lent - April 3, 2022

Texts: Psalm 126, Philippians 3:10a, John 12:1-8

Philippians 3:10a I want to know Christ.

John 12:1-8 Jesus' kindness to people who were suffering mostly brought him trouble. Just before this story, Jesus raised his friend Lazarus, brother to Mary and Martha, right out of the grave –surely a miracle of love! This infuriated the religious authorities. Already fed up, they now set out to kill him in earnest. Jesus doesn't turn aside, but heads straight toward his own violent death in Jerusalem. Except, he takes a detour to Bethany for a quiet meal with friends.

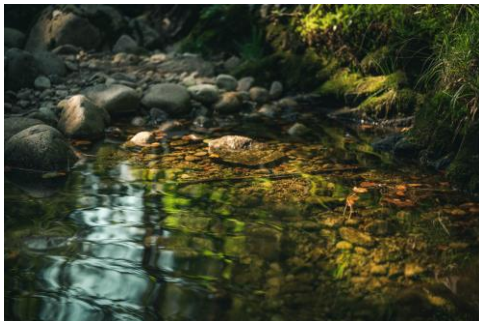
Just six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany. There they had a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of expensive perfume of pure nard, and anointed his feet, and dried them with her hair. Judas Iscariot, one of the disciples (the one who was about to betray) him said, “Why wasn't this sold for 300 denarii [the value of an entire year's wages] and the money given to the poor?” He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief. He kept the common purse, and used to steal what was put into it. Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.” We proclaim Christ crucified, the wisdom and power of God.

When the world around you is in turmoil, how do you respond? Too often, I disappoint myself. I get testy, short-tempered. I let things get under my skin and say something I don't mean. Or I go off and cry alone. I think other people might be feeling the same. The world is in turmoil these days, even more than usual, it seems. How do we respond?

Jesus' world was in turmoil, too—the political climate, and his personal world. The vultures were gathering. Jesus turned aside from his walk to the cross to accept the kindness of his friends in Bethany: Lazarus. Martha. And Mary. Of course they were grateful. That empty place at the table wasn't empty any more; Lazarus was there with them. Busy Martha served the meal. Mary poured a jar of perfume on his feet, wiped them with her hair. In their culture, of course, you'd welcome guests by bathing their hot, dusty feet in cool water. Mary went further. But do you suppose she really knew that Jesus was going to die that week? I think it was a simple, though costly, act of kindness. A simple act of pure love that would give Jesus strength and courage for the suffering to come. Mary had no idea her action would echo through history. It was just a simple act of kindness that might have gone unnoticed, except for what followed.

The story set me thinking: how often people pestered Jesus. They hung onto him for healing, they held out their hands for bread, they crowded around to hear him speak. And some of them baited him, taunted him, and finally entrapped him, and killed him. How often do we hear of someone simply offering him kindness from an overflowing heart? Rarely. This story is unusual.

Kindness is not unusual, though in hard times when it's most needed it can be thin on the ground. When has a simple act of kindness changed you? Once as a young adult, late teens or early 20s, I visited my older sister. I don't remember why. I don't remember the town, I don't remember the time. I didn't arrive in a car; I walked up to her house on a blistering hot day. She wasn't home. I sat on the porch to wait. I was hungry and tired. Her downstairs neighbor came home first. He was from the Middle East; I forget what country. His dark skin and black eyes and curly hair looked strange and exotic. He saw how it was with me, but rather than invite me in (I probably would have refused), he brought out a dish of his own homemade yogurt, made from a culture brought from his home country, his home culture. It was hands down the most delicious yogurt I have ever tasted. While all the other details of this encounter are blurred, his simple act of kindness remains vivid in my memory. Who knows, maybe it's the reason I've always felt warmly toward our Arab and Muslim brothers and sisters. He cultured me with kindness.

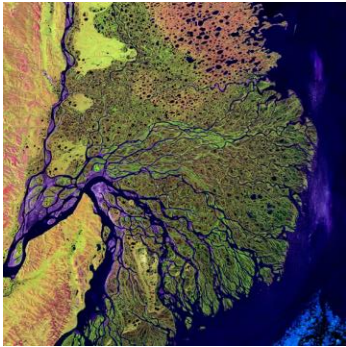


A chance encounter with kindness can change life on a very elemental level, as yogurt culture changes milk. Kindness can ripple through the stream of your life, changing the color, the temperature, even the direction of its flow. When has a simple act of kindness changed you? Last week, Vera shared a story that rang true to me: in her case, the context was clear. I asked her to share it today.

Time and distance lend perspective.



The greater the distance, the more clearly we see the course our lives have taken. We see the influences that have shaped us...and made us kind



Perhaps only from the vantage point of the heavens will we truly see all the touches and tributaries that shaped our lives, cultured our understanding. And we may see all the beauty that grew from a simple act of kindness. Every act of kindness, no matter how small, holds a cosmic resonance, holds the power to change the flow of our personal history, maybe of all history. You think that's an exaggeration? Remember how kindness changed you!

If I say, I want to know Christ. I mean I want to know even his suffering so that I can also know his glory. I wish I had known him as Mary, Martha and Lazarus knew him: to offer him kindness to give him strength for what lay ahead. Would you do it if you could? It's within our reach, for Jesus told us, "the poor you have always with you;" and, "Surely, I tell you, anyone who has offered one of these little ones a cup of cold water in my name will surely not lose their reward." Amen. TBTG

Indebtedness:

I am indebted to my spiritual director for the idea of currents in a stream that join and change the flow, and indirectly, the idea of a culture that changes us. The pictures this week are Mary's jar of perfume, our bulletin cover, "Brazen Beauty," by Lisle Gwynn Garrity, in *Full to the Brim*, A Sanctified Art. Nature photographs, in order, are from Unsplash artists: Conscious Design, Kouji Tsuru, Matthew Brodeur, and the US Geological Survey.



Prayers

For all the places in the world where kindness is in short supply and sorely needed: Ukraine, Tigray, Yemen, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Russia; for all the people in those places who heroically provide kindness at great cost to themselves. May kindness, not bombs and tanks, determine the course of this war.

For all the places where misunderstandings have taken over life, may they be rooted out. For our own nation, that we may come together; may kindness sweeten the bitter divides.

For all those still sick with covid, or apprehensive about another surge: may we see our precautions and restrictions as kindness to one another. For children in all difficult circumstances; may they have the opportunity to learn and grow and flourish.

For those nearest to our hearts, all isolated friends, all those helping both parents and children through hard times, for all who mourn: may they find peace and comfort in your kindly love. Amen