

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, C
Isaiah 43:16-21
Philippians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

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I invite you to pause with me and reflect on something beautiful. Let's reflect on kindness. I invite you to take a moment to recall when kindness has been a part of your life. A time when you received a simple kindness. It could be something very recent, or something in the past.

Take a moment to reflect quietly, on your own....

If you wish, I invite you to turn to a neighbor and share a word about that kindness you experienced.... Or listen to the kindness they experienced....

Would anyone be willing to share an example of kindness with us?

Thank you. Kindness is something we don't forget.

A kindness I received is this little gift a friend made for me when I was going through a hard time. My friend was learning to knit and she decided to create this little wrap she calls a "shawlette." She brought it over as surprise. I love it because it's blue and it has little sparkles in it, and she made it specially for me. So if there's a day when I'm feeling frazzled or not as strong as I'd like... I just put on my little shawlette and it gives me strength.

Kindness is something we don't forget.

Kindness shines in a world that can be harsh and even brutal. Where some days it looks like the bullies are winning. Where violence receives top billing, and good people are killed every day, even children. Spotlights focus on destruction and trouble. And maybe you've wondered, as I have, whether what our faith teaches is really true.

Is love really stronger than hate? Is good really stronger than evil? Or are we just naïve to think that... are we suckers to follow a way of peace and gentleness... What difference can kindness or compassion make in the face of such destructive behavior?

It's good to remember that kindness can actually save a life. There was a strange incident on the New York subway this week. A boy of about 12 wandered onto the tracks in Brooklyn, no one knows how. It seemed he had autism, his face was very serious, no emotion, no speech, he was staring straight ahead and clapping his hands. He had somehow avoided stepping on the highly charged electric rail, but there were

trains coming. An emergency signal went out in time for train operator Hopeton Kiffin to stop his train and secure it. Then this father of three acted quickly and gently. He got out on the tracks and approached the boy slowly and offered his hand. Later he explained, “I have an 8-year-old daughter and sometimes words—they don’t listen—so I just gently held him by the hand. I thought, ‘Let me guide him, and let him feel secure.’” It took 15 minutes, but Mr. Kiffin was finally able to guide the boy to safety. His kindness and gentle manner really did claim victory over death that day. (NY Times article, 4/4/19)

Another gentle, beautiful gesture made the news this week. Slovakia elected its first female president this week, and the first thing Zuzana Caputova did was to kneel at a sidewalk memorial and light a candle. She was honoring a Slovakian journalist and his fiancé who were shot and killed last year, while he was investigating the political corruption that is overrunning Slovakia. Anger and protests erupted all over the country. Now, President Caputova represents a people’s movement to root out corruption. Her slogan is “Stand up to evil” and she intentionally rejects the “aggressive nationalist, populist vocabulary” that is on the rise in central Europe. Her gentle, symbolic gesture of lighting that memorial candle represents her courageous and steady resolve to change her country’s future. (npr.org article 3/31/2019, *Guardian* article 3/30/2019)

Today’s scripture describes a gentle and symbolic gesture that has become immortal.

The story of a woman anointing Jesus is told in all four gospels, with different details each time. Usually the woman is not named. In one story she’s identified as an uninvited sinner from the street who shocks some very proper dinner guests. But in this version of the story the anointing woman is not an outsider, she is Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha, dear friend of Jesus, and the event is a family dinner held to honor Jesus after he has raised her brother Lazarus from the dead.

Mary took a pound of expensive perfume— not a few ounces, a *pound*, worth a year’s wages—and poured it on the feet of Jesus. That soothing oil must have felt so good on Jesus’ weary feet as she tenderly massaged them. Then she took down her hair (and let me say, this was simply *not* done!) and with her long hair Mary wiped Jesus’ feet and tended to them. The fragrance of perfume filled the whole house, surrounding everyone with sweetness and luxury.

It was a gesture of beautiful personal kindness and also personal devotion to her Lord and teacher. Yet Mary was speaking a physical language the male disciples did not fully understand. Her feminine language of touch was so sensual it made them suspicious. Some might even have seen it as sexual, though it was not. The fact that some biblical

writings remember this event involving a “woman of the street” might be a clue that some people just never could get comfortable with it.

But truly, Mary’s gesture was about kindness and creature comfort, a beautiful gift when Jesus really needed it. At this time opposition and conflict were growing, and people had begun to plot against his life. Mary’s act of kindness renewed Jesus and gave him strength.

And maybe today we can understand her action better than anyone could at the time. We see that Mary was anointing Jesus the way people anointed royalty – because he would become the king who wore a crown of thorns. She was anointing him for his death, just the way women used sweet spices and oils to prepare a body for burial. Mary was symbolically recognizing Jesus as King and Savior -- our Savior, who died and rose to show God’s ultimate victory of love over hate, and good over evil.

Just as Mary showed her heartfelt devotion, you and I have devoted ourselves to Christ, too. We have devoted ourselves to loving God and following in Christ’s way of kindness, peace, compassion and forgiveness. Christ’s way turns the other cheek and refuses to return evil for evil. Christ’s way is rooted in God’s eternal, redeeming love that is continually remaking and recreating this world to become what it is meant to be.

This way we follow may seem absurd to some people, or out of step, it may even seem crazy to us sometimes, yet it is the way to true and lasting life. It’s the way to salvation in unity with God, and even more – it is a saving way of life, a manner of life that promotes life for others and for us and all creation.

Kindness, compassion, gentleness, courageous and resilient love might at first glance seem like no match for automatic weapons and systemic hate. No match for the depth of need and suffering that our neighbors may experience.

But we know differently. We know that no act of simple kindness is every wasted. No expression of steadfast love is without significance or influence. Every work of forgiveness and reconciliation and service and compassion and justice contributes to the abundant life God is multiplying for this earth. When we do the loving thing in Christ’s name, we participate in God’s own compassion for the whole human family.

I’ve often been bothered by the way Jesus says in this passage, “You always have the poor with you. You don’t always have me.” It sounded to me like Jesus was dismissing them – “Oh, there will always be people in need, more than you can ever help.” But now I hear Jesus saying something different. I hear Jesus saying, “You will always have people

who need your generosity, you will always have people who need kindness, you will always have justice that needs to be done. This opportunity is always before you.”

And I hear Jesus saying this as an invitation. I hear him asking me, asking us, “What person near you needs a kind or healing touch? What action can you take to be my person, to share Christ’s generous spirit?”

What a beautiful opportunity we have before us. Every day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.