

Have you ever had anyone be kind to you? I mean, out of the way kind, not just run of the mill kind. Where they went above and beyond what was expected of them, surprised you with their level of kindness, touched you so deeply that you were lost for words?

About 20 years ago I had booked a vacation to visit a friend and my goddaughter in Australia. My friend sent me a list of things that she wanted me to bring that she could not get in Australia.... Or that were way more expensive there. So I shopped and loaded up two large suitcases to fly with. About a week before I left, I fell and broke my ankle, so ended up in a boot and on crutches to travel with. This wasn't too much of a problem, I thought, as I could just check my bags with a friend's help and then pick them up at the other end, again with help. But when I got to the airport I was told that, because I was going from a domestic flight to an international one, I would need to get my bags after the first flight and go to the international terminal to check them in. There was a train between the two terminals, I was assured, but I was advised to get a cab from one terminal to the other for ease. So I did. The cab dropped me off after collecting a hefty fare for the five minute ride, but dropped me off in the wrong place, vaguely pointing to a door I should go in through. I didn't know where I was.... It was close to midnight, dark and empty where he dropped me off. It seemed like I was in the staff break area, but no one

was there. The door he had pointed to was locked. I had no cell phone and was in pain and had no idea what to do next. After about 10 minutes another cab happened to drive by. He stopped and asked what I was doing there and if I needed help. I told the driver what had happened, and he loaded my cases into his car and said he would take me where I needed to be. It was a fifteen minute drive around the airport lanes, exiting the airport and coming back, as those airport roads often are. And then he unloaded my suitcases, called someone over to help me and refused payment with the words, "I am called by God to help. I am a Muslim, and we are taught to be kind. God guided me to you. May God bless you on your journey. And may you remember this when you think about Muslims. We are not all bad." I stood there with tears in my eyes as I thanked him, and blessed him too as he hurried away to pick up someone else, for a fare this time. I was humbled that this stranger would go so out of his way for me, and bless me with those words so soon after 9/11 had taken place. And it was this that was one of the things that inspired me to work at the Marin Interfaith Council during and after seminary, this interest in other religions and how we are all following the Golden Rule.... That old saying to treat others as we wish to be treated. Or, as my friends' t-shirt simply says, "Be Kind!"

Anthony Douglas Williams says,

"When an act of kindness touches another soul... all humanity becomes stronger."

And after 9/11, we needed that, for all humanity to become stronger. And these days we need this, for all humanity to become stronger. And what a paradox this is.... That we become stronger by being kind, by receiving kindness, that these acts which recognize the vulnerability in one another are the very things that make us stronger as a whole. When we admit we are dependent on kindness we can grow as community.

For if we are honest, we are all dependent on this level of kindness at various points in our lives.... The level of kindness that goes above and beyond. We are all vulnerable in some way that depends on the kindness of others at times in our lives. And what would it be if we admitted this more readily? How much stronger could humankind become if we each accepted that we were dependent on kindness more?

Who knows how long I would have been standing in that strange spot at the unfamiliar airport if my new friend had not stopped and helped me. And who knows how long the paralyzed man would have been paralyzed if his friends had not shown extraordinary kindness. Sure, anyone might have taken him to see Jesus that day. They might have even tried to get him through the crowds. But how many would have carried him up to the roof,

torn open the thatch and lowered him down? How many would have dared to care this much?

So often, as Americans, as people of the 21st century, as people who have lived through a lot, we tend to be independent, proud and striving to achieve this as much as possible. It is seen as a mark of success. We try to do as much as we can for ourselves. We learnt to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps early on and not to rely on others for help. We forget that we are, truly, dependent on one another for kindness and are reluctant to ask for help, believing we will just end up being a burden. And, at the same time, many of us would go out of our way to help a neighbor or a friend.

My next door neighbor is well into her 90's. She has a large yard, and a large garden plot in her yard. Since before I moved in, she has been saying, "next year I'm not going to have a vegetable garden. It's too much work." Yet, each year she plants and weeds and waters and prunes and bakes and jams..... mostly so she can share the bounty of her harvest. It pains me to see her out there mowing her lawn or bent over in the garden, but she won't accept any help to do it. Even her kids and grandkids are not allowed to help her. And, while she complains how much work it is and how sore and tired she gets, she won't let anyone else to show her kindness, or even repay her for just a little of the kindness she offers our neighborhood. She is growing lettuce for a widower down the street, and

rhubarb for a niece who loves her rhubarb jam. She grows rutabaga for one of the sisters from the monastery who likes them and radishes for a grandson. She picks apples from an orchard where the owner is too old to pick them, and peels, chops and makes apple sauce to give back to her. And while she does all this, spreading her kindness to our town, she forgets that kindness should be a two way thing. It's hard for her to remember that she, too, is dependent on kindness.

This interdependence is vital to life though, and seems to be what we have forgotten. I think that when we have enough, or perceive that we have enough, it can be easy to forget. When we have an abundance, we forget. It is often only when our needs become obvious, or when something shows us how much we need community, that we realize we are dependent on kindness.

This is not the understanding everywhere though. In times when we don't have enough there is often a greater awareness of the need to be and share kind. Studies have shown that people who live in on close to the poverty level donate the biggest percentage of their income to help others, and that, when there is true community people will sacrifice to make sure that everyone is taken care of.

There is a story you may have heard about a western anthropologist who went to a country in Africa to study the social behavior of an indigenous

tribe. He proposed a game to the children and they willingly agreed to be part of it. He put a basket filled with local fruits underneath a tree and told the children that whoever would reach the basket first would win the whole basket and could eat the fruits all by themselves. He lined them all up and raised his hand to give the start signal. Ready. Set. Go!

What happened next astonished him. For the children took each other's hands and started running together. They all reached the basket at the same time. Then they sat down in a big circle and enjoyed the fruits together, laughing and smiling all the time. The anthropologist could not believe what he saw and he asked them why they had waited for each other as one could have taken the whole basket all for themselves. The children shook their heads and replied, "Ubuntu, how can one of us be happy if all the others are sad?"

Desmond Tutu explains Ubuntu with these words: "One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu – the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – Ubuntu- you are known for your generosity and kindness. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. A person with ubuntu is open and

available to others, affirming of others, kind natured and does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, when others are thirsty or hungry.”

The friends of the paralyzed man in our scripture knew this when each picked up a corner of that man’s mat.

Because of the crowds, those men couldn’t get through the door of the room where Jesus stood. So they climbed to the top of the building, tore off the roof, and they lowered the man to Jesus. They were willing to do whatever they needed to to bring the man to the source of healing. They were willing to practice ubuntu, knowing that when one of them was hurting or unhappy, none of them were free or happy. That all deserve the freedom of health and the chance to heal when some are healed. That we are better when all are ok than when just some are ok.

And so these men picked up a corner of the paralyzed mans’ mat. They found a way. They persevered until their friend could be seen by Jesus. Could be healed by Jesus. Could be brought to wholeness. Could taste the sweetness of this freedom offered to him by being able to walk once more.

As you enter into this week, practice ubuntu. Practice inter-dependence.

Be kind. Be extra kind! For in doing so, all humanity will grow stronger, will find healing, will perceive a new way to move through the wilderness of life.

Tear open the barriers between you and Jesus and allow the blessing to flow.

Amen