

Incidental Saints
Reading from the Old Testament: 2 Kings 5:1-15a
Reading from the New Testament: 2 Corinthians 3:3-6a

A month before shots were fired at Fort Sumter, Abraham Lincoln stood atop the platform on the steps of the Capitol building and addressed a fracturing nation in his first inaugural address. I cannot fathom what he was feeling in that moment, but later when asked how he liked being president, Lincoln answered, “You have heard the story, haven’t you, about the man who was tarred and feathered and carried out of town on a rail? A man in the crowd asked him how he liked it. His reply was that if it was not for the honor of the thing, he would much rather walk.” And yet, knowing the growing inevitability of a tragic conflict bathed in blood, possibly even with the understanding that every person present at his inauguration would not escape being touched in some way by the coming bloodshed, Lincoln addressed the assembly:

“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all

over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.” (John Meachum, *The Soul of America*)

Hearts touched by the better angels of our nature. Surely, you have known the spirit-lifting feel of that touch, but how does that touch become a condition that infects how you approach the world instead of a fleeting and uncommon inclination? I remember a time I was riding with a friend in heavy traffic. He proudly wore his reputation as an aggressive driver, and he could escape a packed parking lot posthaste by the sheer strength of will. In the game of parking lot chicken, he always won. You got out of his way or you lived with a ding in your door. Your choice.

However, when plowing through every seam or crack between bumpers, before he exited the parking lot, he would allow one car to break in line in front of him. Just one. Yep, he'd check that *Good Samaritan* box and drive on. Watch out! His spirit of generosity, at least in regard to auto etiquette, was randomly episodic, rather than habitual. His better angels were like second cousins who visit once a year.

Periodically, you will see a transitory and trendy campaign arise with the hope of appealing to your better angels. *Everything I Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten; Pay It Forward; WWJD; The Ice Bucket Challenge*. Well, standing proudly amidst this movement mafia is *Random Acts of Kindness*, those kindnesses offered without agenda or notions of *quid pro quo*. You've heard the stories and possibly added to the inventory yourself: paying the toll for the car behind you (*except maybe on I77 for the next 50 years*); carrying the groceries for the distraught, overwhelmed mother wrestling three colicky kids in the checkout line; paying the tab for the elderly diners or the veteran or the police officer seated near you at the restaurant; raking a neighbor's leaves; offering to say the blessing even though the preacher is present (*Well, maybe that's a bit ambitious*).

Random acts of kindness. I have to ask, though, why does kindness have to be random. I read this week about how one person became personally invested in kindness. Boarding a plane for Phoenix to see her dying father, she received the news he had died just before takeoff. Throughout the 3-hour flight she sat in stunned silence and upon landing, she walked to the nearest wall, sat down and cried. She

sat there and cried for two hours amidst the thousands of passengers rushing to and fro toward their gate or their bags, and no one, not a single person, stopped to ask if she was okay. She says, “It was that day that I realized how much we need each other. It was that day I realized that kindness isn’t normal.” (*randomactsofkindness.org*)

Kindness isn’t normal. I appreciate the movement of the self-identified *Raktivists*, but why should kindness be the exception and not the rule? Particularly these days when the public sphere seems ruled by resounding rudeness, why should kindness be relegated to the random occurrence? Why should kindness ever be linked to weakness and not strength? Why can’t we understand and honor kindness as a character trait instead of experiencing it as an occasional blip on your radar screen?

Truth is, a good percentage of those random acts of kindness aren’t so random anyway. A good percentage of those random acts of kindness are the gestures of people who are already inherently kind or have been lovingly nurtured or trained toward kindness. I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that their daily deportment covers the sin, indifference, and rudeness of many. In fact, I’ll go so far as to say that

what holds this volatile, broken, sin-sick world from collapsing on itself is the daily unpublicized benevolence of those incidental, little known saints infected with a chronic case of kindness.

Our story today is populated by the powers, principalities, and the prominent. We have kings, generals, and prophets walking onto the stage. Broadway producers know the value of casting well-known celebrities in their productions. They know that is how you get toes in the ticket line. Anyone who has been to Broadway will report that when a beloved celebrity first walks on to stage, the audience will erupt with applause and cheers. Why, the celebrity may even break character for a moment to acknowledge the adoration with that cliched actor's bow. Well this story is replete with VIPs, the kind that require an entourage.

Naaman is a 4-star general who commands an army and has the ear of Syria's king. He's the kind of guy whose mere presence causes even kings to stand a little straighter and squeeze the tush a little tighter. But, Naaman has a problem – leprosy. It's not such that it prohibits social interaction, but it is maddening, if not debilitating. Now, I'm thinking that as a general he has the best health plan available, complete with a concierge physician and immediate access to

Walter Reed Hospital. Generals don't do waiting rooms. But even with all that, nothing has worked for Naaman. And you know the drill, if Naaman's not happy, no one's happy. In this condition, when anyone in Naaman's orbit says, "I feel your pain," they are probably not expressing empathy; rather, they are stating reality.

So, into the story enters an unnamed, incidental voice. And let's not romanticize the context. She is a slave, a young girl captured in one of Syria's skirmishes with Israel, and brought, or marched, or dragged to Syria's capitol, Damascus, where she is thrust into servitude, answering to every whim of Naaman's wife. This is not the life for which she had hoped. This is not where she would choose to be. Constantly harried, chronically homesick, and yet, in spite of her circumstance and encumbrance, her character of kindness remains, her generous spirit is intact.

"If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." Naaman is packing his bag as her words still linger in the air. You know the feeling, she could have told him to stand on his head and gargle peanut butter, and he would have given it a shot. Misery makes you a willing lab rat. But here's an important

twist in the story. This young, unnamed woman of faith directs him to a faith leader, a servant of God, but Naaman being all General Big Shot decides to do things his way because ... he knows people. Next thing we know, Syria's king is writing a letter that will get Naaman in to see Israel's king, who upon reading said letter goes all Defcon 2, fearing Syrians are coming to pilfer what they didn't get the last time they came. You see, the Syrian king forgot to mention anything about Israel's prophet Elisha. You can imagine the Israeli king's dismay, "Cure your leprosy? Do I look like Dr. Grey? Hawkeye Pierce?" What's the scam here?"

This wasn't supposed to be a matter of international détente, but the big egos and their gilded swords get involved, things go sideways, and we're on the verge of World War Z. It was enough of a kerfuffle that Elisha hears about it, and I can just see him shaking his head, rubbing his temples, and directing his assistant, "Just go tell him I'll handle it."

So, Naaman along with his entourage, his 700 lbs. of silver worth about \$165,000, his big old jar of gold shekels, and a wagon load of precious fabric, comes wheeling up to Elisha's front door. It leaves me

asking, if you're such a big deal why would you feel the need to go around flashing your wealth to convince others you're a big deal?

For some reason, I picture Naaman, dressed out in his full-on general regalia, epaulets and all, sitting in one of those old doctor's waiting rooms, the ones bathed in Formica, fluorescent light, fake ferns, and 2-year-old copies of *Modern Farmer* (remember, *I'm from Missouri*). By now, Naaman's finger is tapping the plastic arm of his chair about eight times faster than the second hand on the wall clock. Generals and people who see themselves as a big deal don't wait well.

And then ... the temerity ... Elisha doesn't even come out to see him. He sends the candy-striper ... with a note! "Go wash in the Jordan seven times." Naaman's fuming. "What do you mean, he's busy! And he wants me to do what? In that? I heard a scholar this week who's been to Jordan's banks many times, and she said that at many places, the Jordan is not much more than a muddy, glorified creek. "Why'd I even come here anyway?"

But yet again, an incidental saint, his condition of slavery not enough to shackle his goodness, calms the raging general. "If the

prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean'?"

So, Naaman finally gets over himself, wades in the water, and is healed. He emerges, his skin now clean, but more than that, his spirit is humbled with the awareness that it wasn't the water, it was the Lord, at work in the incidental voices of the unnamed for whom kindness could not be constrained by the very real burdens of life.

Kindness isn't normal? Why should kindness be the exception and not the rule? Particularly these days when the public sphere seems ruled by resounding rudeness, why should kindness be relegated to the random occurrence? Why can't we understand and honor kindness as a character trait instead of experiencing it as an occasional blip on your radar screen?

What holds this volatile, broken, sin-sick world from collapsing on itself is the daily unpublicized benevolence of those incidental, little known saints infected with a chronic case of kindness. If you're going to join a movement, why not join that one, changing the random into the

routine? Do good, not because it's a nice thing to occasionally do, or that it makes you feel good. Do kindness not for what you get from it, but because kind is who you are. Amen.