

“Brokenness Into Kindness”

By Scott Runyon

First Baptist Church Birmingham

Dec 15, 2019

Acts 28:1-2

Ribeena and her husband were heading out shopping on a cold Saturday in January. They passed by an elderly couple sitting at a bus stop waiting for a bus. Ribeena noticed that they had thin clothing and the woman had only flip flops on her feet. As they passed by, Ribeena’s heart went out to them. She looked over at her husband and asked if he would turn around to pick them up and take them to wherever they were going. He did.

It turns out that they were going to a Temple down the street for worship and were so very grateful for the personal ride. Ribeena said “...my husband and I got out and helped them out of the car and I will never forget the look of thanks in their eyes and how they hugged us.” Years later, Ribeena still tears up thinking about that elderly couple and how powerful it was to offer a simple act of kindness.

Today we are considering the power of kindness in the season of Advent. Finding places where kindness is needed often requires

that we slow down and shift our thinking toward others and away from ourselves.

The two short verses we are going to look at from the Bible today need a bit of context. There is a long backstory leading up to this scene in the last chapter of the book of Acts. I’ll give you a lightening summary.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the community of Jesus followers begin growing in Jerusalem and spreads from there. This movement, isn’t thought of as a new religion, but is perceived as a threat to the Jewish religious leaders. A young, up and coming Jewish religious leader named Saul gets noticed for his zeal and influence and is given a job to help silence this movement by traveling all through the land persecuting Christians, especially the leaders.

One day, along the road to do this “dirty” work, Saul has an encounter with Jesus, which transforms him. He changes the direction of his ministry and joins those he had been persecuting.

With a new ministry, now to build God’s Church, he changes his name to Paul and begins traveling far and wide spreading the good

news of Jesus everywhere he goes. He faces doubts, successes, tries new methods for growing the new church, some work, some don't. Along the way, by trial and error, Paul becomes quite an expert and leader among these infant churches.

He mentors a handful of people who will become the next generation of Church leaders far and wide. Beginning at Antioch, north from Jerusalem along the Mediterranean Sea, Paul makes four missionary journeys, spreading this good news about Jesus' death and resurrection, each trip becoming a larger circle from the last.

Paul is pushing the envelop, sharing with people who are considered outsiders to the Jewish faith. This is earning Paul a reputation as a rabble rouser and boat rocker. He becomes the target for many who want to silence him, to kill him. He seems to survive each time by the skin of his teeth, and takes on many scars in the process.

He is being beaten, stoned, imprisoned, and persecuted to the point that would break most people. But Paul remains both faithful and committed to persisting, learning,

retooling, and adjusting along this life path. It is the most difficult of paths, but it is the one Paul was called to and is walking faithfully. He is malleable, always keeping his heart open and tender to the Spirit of God as well as the many new people he meets along the way.

Through the years, Paul's eyes are ever more transfixed on Rome as the center of the empire and where he is feeling drawn in order that the message he carries might reach the whole world.

Once again, Paul is captured and taken into custody by local militia, but this time, as a Roman citizen he appeals to Cesar, who of course rules from Rome, where he wants to go.

The story's climax is on the horizon as he is being shipped by boat with other prisoners to Rome to stand trial for being a follower of Jesus. As they are nearing Rome, after being bruised and battered from these journeys, the ship that Paul is on meets a terrible storm at sea. The ship is totally destroyed, but all of the crew, including all the prisoners, are miraculously spared and wash ashore on an island called Malta, a territory under Roman rule.

However, these Maltese people seem to know nothing of Jesus, or Paul, or the new growth of churches throughout the Mediterranean basin.

Without knowing anything about him, the island natives meet Paul, a prisoner, and the crew in the last chapter of the second of two books on the work of God written by a man named Luke. The first book is called Luke and the second is Acts.

READ ACTS 28:1-2

After being battered, persecuted, imprisoned, and probably had the appearance of one who was broken, and now shipwrecked, the kind people of Malta extend to Paul and the crew a warm reception, filled with wonderful kindness, something that I am sure was life sustaining.

They all linger on the island for three months to recuperate, but also it seems that Paul takes the opportunity, as he always does, to carry out the ministry that God gave to him. He heals many of their sick, including the father of the Island chief. They not only respect Paul, but consider him like a god.

After three months, the people of Malta give their guests all the

supplies they need and send them on their way toward Rome.

It seems that nothing can diminish the work of God through Paul, but I also have to believe that those respites along the way made this ministry possible — the respite like the warm kindness shown to Paul on the Island of Malta. Acts of kindness had something to do with Paul's ability to continue on the most difficult of paths.

We all need kindness after life has left us feeling weak and broken.

A week ago today, our beloved Pam Gibson died after struggling with a liver that wasn't functioning and stage four lung cancer. Many of you were at the visitation or funeral service last week. I am thankful for the kindness you showed Pam's husband Jim and her daughter Suzy, and the rest of the family. Your presence there makes a huge difference.

I have also been connected with at least 11 other families this year who have also experienced loss, some from inside the congregation and some from outside.

One thing that is very evident when people lose loved ones is that they are at their weakest and most

vulnerable, feeling broken inside. At those points, one of the most powerful things they can experience is kindness from another human being.

This kindness can be expressed in a number of creative ways, but always involves focused presence.

Kindness gives us the reassurance that they are not alone.

It gives them the courage to face the coming days.

It gives them the strength they need to honestly face their own natural human emotions.

It gives them what they need to continue the healing journey.

Paul needed kindness, and so do we — all of us.

I invite you today, to consider who might need a bit of kindness.

I'm not talking about a random act of kindness here — but a deliberate, intentional act based on human connection, given freely, without condition.

We act in kind ways because we are human and also because our faith tells us it is important.

Especially in this Advent season, we are racing after the perfect gifts for the people we love. We race to keep up with all of the parties and get together at work and with the kids in school. Even when we try to keep things simple, there are lots of requests that come our way requiring our attention and energy.

I invite you to take a few moments to be quiet ... to sit still ... allow your mind and heart to find a place of rest. In that space do three things.

#1 Think of a time when you felt broken and could really use some kindness. Perhaps someone offered you a kind act. Or perhaps nobody offered you any form of kindness and you felt alone. Either way, think on that experience.

#2 Consider who you know who might need a bit of kindness right now. Maybe it is a family member. Maybe it is a friend. Maybe it is one of your child's teachers, or someone from work.

#3 Write down what you might do to show them kindness so that you don't lose sight of it. Write down how and when. Then follow through and you will help transform brokenness into kindness.