

Little Things Mean a Lot September 21, 2008

Several years ago, I clipped an article out of the *Star* whose heading read: "Downtown pencil salesman's friends pay tribute to a life well-lived." My curiosity aroused, I perused the article, and discovered that the man who was being talked about was someone named Max "Shorty" Wilson, who had lost his legs to polio at the age of six, whose wife and brother had died several years before, and who had seemingly experienced one set of misfortunes after another.

But, for many years, come rain or shine, Max Wilson took the bus downtown, and sold pencils from a cigar box from about 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., first in front of the old L.S. Ayres building, and then more recently in front of the old Block's department store building. One day, he didn't appear in his usual haunts; that was the day he died of a heart attack.

At his funeral, many of those who encountered him on the streets of Indianapolis showed up, several of them with pencils in their coat pockets, and they talked about his life, noting that he always had a smile and a joke for passers-by. One who attended the funeral said this, "Max knew tons of people. He taught us all the most important thing you do was be kind, have a sense of humor and give a little bit."

Kindness—it's such a little thing, but it can make a huge impact on those who are the beneficiaries of it! Certainly it can be shown in doing good deeds, but it is really much more than that. C. Neil Strait described kindness this way: "**Kindness is more than deeds. It is an attitude, an expression, a look, a touch. It is anything that lifts another person.**"

Kindness has an effect on all of us, and not just on the one receiving it. Jonathan Haidt, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia has researched kindness, and made an important observation. He has coined the term *elevation* to describe the emotion we feel when we encounter evidence of what he calls moral beauty. In other words, Haidt has documented that goodness is contagious, and it does not have to be extraordinary things that trigger the sense of elevation. It can be the simplest, smallest, seemingly insignificant words and acts that make such a big impact. Haidt said, "**Exposure to goodness pulls all of us up a little bit.**"

I really think he was trying to describe what the writer Paul of today's Bible passage was naming. Our version this morning tells what a life touched by God's loving goodness is like, and it does that by using an analogy of clothing ourselves with all kinds of good things—one being kindness. The passage reads this way: "**So, chosen by God for this new life**

of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline."

In her book, *Happiness: How to Find It and Keep It*," author Joan Duncan Oliver writes about kindness, saying: "Kindness is one of the most undervalued commodities—which is too bad because it doesn't take much of it to turn the day around. I wonder if we overlook kindness because it's so simple." She continues: "**What's really involved? Someone needs something, we help. Someone feels low, we console. Someone trips, we catch them. There's a need, we respond. Then the other person is grateful and relieved—and we're happy knowing we could help. Kindness is a low-effort, high-return exchange.**"

It really is a low-effort, high-return exchange, and something many of us overlook. Just a little bit of kindness goes a long way, and it's something of which we are all capable. Take, for example, a smile. William Arthur Ward has said, "**A warm smile is the universal language of kindness,**" and indeed it is. Notice next time we're in a store or walking down the street. See what happens if we take that instant to smile at the person we're passing; odds are, he or she will smile back, and for those few seconds, we've given and received a little kindness. The smallest thing can turn even the darkest day around.

A few months ago, we handed 60 people \$50 and asked the ones who took the challenge to go out and make the world a better place by sewing seeds of kindness and love. The stories are accumulating, and the impact goes far beyond the reaches of this room, or even this community. Let me just share a few things that some Gardeners did to share a little kindness and make some corner of the world a little better.

--One family of three multiplied their seed money with donations from Mom and Dad and from their daughter's allowance, and using great shopping skills, were able to turn the \$50 into \$405 worth of brand new children's books that were donated to I.P.S. School 20. \

--Another Gardener has been volunteering at the JR Dalton Food Pantry, and got to know a guy there by the name of Roy, who has had a rather blighted past, but who is turning his life around, staying sober, and out of prison. Roy had learned how to sew when he was in prison, and he was good at it. When he asked our Garden volunteer if she knew where he might get a used sewing machine, things started to come together for her, and she realized that, with the seed money from the Big Give, she had the means to buy him a new sewing machine and everything he needed to get going.. Thanks to her kindness, he will be able to do what he loves—sewing and making quilts.

--Another Garden family sponsored a garage sale, and donated over \$1200 in cash, as well as a cargo van filled with clothing to Third Phase, a woman's shelter and food pantry in Noblesville.

--Yet another is engaging others to help gather travel sized person items to help in the development of a program teaching the "littles" in the Big Brother/Big Sister program about personal care.

--One couple spread their Big Give seed money around, using it to help a co-worker who is in poor health by starting a kitty to get his car back on the road. They also did several random acts of kindness, like buying a lunch for folks at the next table.

--One Gardener solicited the help of his service club and friends to raise a total of \$1420 to donate to the Red Cross Hoosier-to-Hoosier Flood Relief fund.

--One young man used his money to buy new games and cards and other fun stuff for the mentally challenged kids at his school. He said that the teachers normally have to buy the games, and most of the games were very old and missing pieces, so this gift was most appreciated. The young man wrote, "They were all smiling very big when they received their gifts."

--Yet another group of Gardeners multiplied their money to get \$150 to buy birthday gifts and bingo prizes for the residents at Morningside of College Park, an adult senior community.

When our dear friend and Garden founder, Sherry Fortner, was in the Hospice, I saw many, many gestures of kindness, and each one touched my heart and soul. As many of you know, Sherry really didn't want to be alone, and spontaneously, out of the goodness of their hearts, Gardeners and long-time friends stepped up, surrounding Sherry with love and kindness until she drew her last breath.

Her room there was filled with an incredible sense of love, and it was expressed in so many ways. Certainly, it was evident in the many visits, in holding her hand, in putting moisturizer on her lips or giving her a drink. One Gardener donated a mini DVD player, and another put some of her travel pictures on a DVD so she could look at them, as well as making it possible for her to watch The Garden services she wasn't able to attend.

One day, she wasn't opening her eyes very much, so a Gardener was playing the DVD with the pictures, describing each scene in the finest detail. Her face was right next to Sherry's and when she'd describe a particularly beautiful spot to Sherry, a huge smile—one of Sherry's trademark—would flash across her face.

I watched as one person stroked her face, and talked quietly in her ear, offering calming words of peace, and I heard one Gardener singing to her one day when I walked into the room. Three young men from here visited and brightened her room with wonderful drawings they had made. Still another person brought along her laptop, and Sherry lit up when she was able to get online to check on some of the things she so enjoyed doing.

Those are little things—most of them—but things that meant so very much to Sherry, to Gerry, and to those who had the opportunity to share them. As I said earlier, kindness is contagious, and I suppose these were some of the ways people wanted to show kindness to the Fortners because of their welcoming ways—including lollipops for the little ones—in our parking lot at Beef and Boards. All of the actions I've described really caused the words that Mark Twain once said to ring true for me. He is quoted as saying, "**Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see.**"

I read a story the other day that I thought was the kind of thing every one of us is capable of doing, if we just open our eyes, and pay attention to those around us. It was told by a young woman who described something that happened during her senior year in high school, when she got a part-time job to try to make some money for college. She was working at a local coffee shop, because she thought it would be easy and relatively stress free.

However, what she had not anticipated were the people with enormous orders who chose to use the drive-thru, or those who wanted their coffee remade again and again to get it just to their preference. It was much more difficult to please her customers than she had imagined, but she kept at it.

She said that one rainy, miserable day, one of her regular customers came in looking depressed and defeated. She and a coworker asked if they could help, but he wouldn't reveal any details. He just said that he felt like crawling into bed, pulling the sheets up over his head, and staying there for a few years. Before he left, our high school senior handed him a bag along with his iced coffee. He looked at her questioningly, because he hadn't ordered anything except the coffee. When he opened the bag, he saw that she had given him his favorite type of doughnut. "It's on me," she said. "Have a nice day." He smiled and thanked her before heading out into the rain.

The next day was again rainy and cool, another soggy day. Most folks seemed to want to use the drive-thru, and she spent almost the entire day soaked to the skin and freezing to death while waiting on them. To top it all off, everyone kept complaining about the weather, and no one seemed inclined to tip the server at all!

About seven o'clock that evening, in the middle of making another pot of vanilla hazelnut decaf, the customer from the day before drove up to the window. Instead of ordering anything, he handed her a single pink rose and a little note. He thanked her, and drove off. When she had a chance, she opened the envelope and read what he had written. The note said, "Thanks for being so sweet, kind and thoughtful yesterday. I was sincerely touched by your kindness. It is so nice to meet someone who's genuinely nice, warm, and sensitive and unselfish."

A little thing like a doughnut, a glance, a word, a touch—little things that show a little kindness really can change the world, because such kindness has a ripple effect. I've often talked about what happens when we throw a pebble in a pond. It makes just a tiny splash, but if we continue to watch, we will see that the waves, the ripples, from that first little splash go out and out and out.

That's how it is with kindness—a little pebble of kindness reaches far beyond what we could imagine and makes a huge difference!

Closing;

When Gerry Fortner learned what today's topic was, he gave me a couple of cards that he thought might capture what we've been talking about. Both of them are good, but I really like the way Bobbie Burrow describes kindness with these words:

"I'm talking about the little everyday things you do so easily, like a compliment when someone is feeling down, or a smile that seems to say, "I accept you just as you are." She says, "It seems that the goodness in your heart just spills over and spreads happy feelings all around." She's right, you know, that's exactly what it's like when we give or receive kindness, so as we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we will scatter these pebbles of kindness whether we go.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.