

They Showed Us Unusual Kindness

Psalm 107:8-9; Acts 27:39-28:2; Mark 16:14-20

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Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

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If I could tell you about something that could make you feel better—less anxious, less depressed, more energetic, happier—would you be interested? Maybe? What if I told you it wouldn't cost you anything, and it isn't a drug? And this has all been proven by studies at Harvard, Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles, and other leading research institutions. Would you be interested then? Of course! We all would be, wouldn't we? You know what it is?

Being kind to others. It's true. Simple acts of kindness can produce all these positive things in our lives.

A professor at Cedars-Sinai says that acts of kindness release hormones that contribute to a positive mood and general wellbeing. Casually they refer to these as “the love hormones.” In a more technical or clinical setting, they are called oxytocin and dopamine. These chemicals are produced when a mother breastfeeds her infant, creating an emotional bond between mother and baby. They are produced when we fall in love and when we have intimate contact with a loved one. And, the studies show, they are produced when we perform acts of kindness.

Here's a quote from a Cedars-Sinai blog titled “The Science of Kindness”:

The good news is that a simple act of kindness can reward our bodies and minds with feel-good chemical substances.

Of course, you know how this normally works. When there's good news, there is usually also some bad news, right? Well, not this time. The only thing close to bad news is that this “reward” doesn't last very long—three to four minutes, they say. Which makes me think we are wired to

be kind. We are created in such a way that we are healthier and happier when we perform acts of kindness. (February 13, 2019)

But we are living in an unkind time, aren't we? Public discourse is vile—name calling, misrepresentations of the truth, intentional efforts to slander and hurt others. Division, fear, protectionism, and a general lack of charity seem to be more common today than kindness.

We recently observed the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Christians on the island of Malta selected our theme for this: "They Showed Us Unusual Kindness." I shared this sermon with the folks at Hope Presbyterian Church a couple of weeks ago. Their pastor was here. I told Rev. Ashton that this year's theme is certainly timely.

It was for Paul too. Here's what happened to Paul in the book of Acts. You may remember that he took a group of Gentile converts into the temple, a major violation of Jewish law. That act defiled the temple, they believed. A group drug Paul out of the temple and tried to kill him. Soldiers intervened and saved Paul's life. He was arrested. A mob of 40 men then made a vow to neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. Now, that's a pretty serious vow. They were determined. And not off into the distant future. They wanted to kill Paul, and they wanted to do it now. In the book of Acts, Paul experienced the antithesis of kindness.

Paul was given an opportunity to defend himself. He eventually appealed to Caesar in Rome. Paul was a Roman citizen, and had that right. Plans were made to make the very dangerous winter voyage from Caesarea to Rome. They probably shouldn't have tried. Their ship met a terrible storm. In order to save the ship, they had to throw overboard all their tackle and cargo. The sun didn't shine for many days preventing them from charting their course. After fourteen days adrift with no food, they ate some bread and then threw the rest of the food overboard. They were preparing for shipwreck. The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners, including Paul, so they would not escape. But a centurion ordered them to kill no one. So at the last moment, everyone abandoned ship. The ship hit a shoal and broke into pieces. Some swam ashore. Some floated on pieces of wood from the broken ship. They discovered that they were on the island of Malta, where our theme for this year was developed, about 60 miles south of Sicily.

What a harrowing experience this must have been! Starvation. Storms. Shipwreck. Almost killed. A strange island. Who knew what the natives would be like. The Greek word for “natives” is *barbaroi*, from which the word “barbarian” comes. These natives might just skin them alive and boil them in a big caldron of water!

Well, here’s what actually happened:

The natives showed us unusual kindness. Since it had begun to rain and was cold, they kindled a fire and welcomed all of us around it.

Unusual kindness. The Greek text says, “no usual kindness.” Their actions were beyond the call of duty. They were wet, shaken, afraid, cold, and hungry. The natives on the island of Malta built them a fire and welcomed them. Paul stayed there for three months, enjoying their gracious kindness. The natives were producing a lot of oxytocin and dopamine! And Paul, after being treated with extreme unkindness, was one of the beneficiaries.

We call this hospitality today. One New Testament theologian writes, “Hospitality without discrimination is among the most highly regarded virtues of the ancient world.” He says that hospitality, these simple acts of kindness, is “vested with theological importance.” (Robert Wall, *NIB*, Acts, p. 356) Why? Why would hospitality take on a theological dimension? We know why for the people of Israel. The Hebrew Bible gave them this instruction:

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:19)

The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:34)

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow,

the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.
(Zechariah 7:9-10)

Kindness was theological for the people of Israel. It was for Jesus too. He put it this way: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Here’s a good example. It’s about an U.S. soldier who fought in Iraq. He came home angry, bitter, and very critical of others. He was at the grocery store one day purchasing a few items. He was in the express lane—Ten Items or Fewer. Have you ever been in this line and counted the number of items the person in front of you had? I hate to admit it, but I have. The person in front of this soldier had twelve items. He felt his blood pressure going up. She had a baby with her and took time to show off her baby to the cashier. The cashier just gushed over the little boy, taking him from the woman and talking baby talk to him.

All the while this soldier was getting angrier and angrier. How dare them! She’s in the wrong line to begin with. She’s chit-chatting about her baby and taking far more time than she should. People need to learn to follow the rules.

When he finally got up to the cashier, he made a comment about the little boy. The cashier replied,

Don’t you think he’s so cute! That’s my son. Since my husband was recently killed in action in Iraq, my mom takes care of my baby much of the time. She brings him here to work every day so I can see him. (Intentional Acts of Kindness, Mindful.org, March 22, 2011)

The world needs more kindness. Alabama needs more kindness. Huntsville needs more kindness. We all need more kindness. An unusual kindness that welcomes a stranger, that builds a fire and invites people to gather around. Let the Church—Baptists, Presbyterians, and all the rest—step up and be a radiant, kind witness. Why? God has welcomed us. God has been kind to us. So let us show unusual kindness to others.

Closing Prayer

Continue to shape us, Lord, until we are as kind as Christ. Amen.