

Kindle Kindness  
Reflections by Mary Koon  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
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*Kindness* by Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.  
How you ride and ride  
thinking the bus will never stop,  
the passengers eating maize and chicken  
will stare out the window forever.  
Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,  
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night  
with plans and the simple breath  
that kept him alive.  
Before you know kindness  
as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow  
as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
you must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.  
Then it is only kindness  
that makes sense anymore,

only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day  
to mail letters and purchase bread,  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
it is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you every where  
like a shadow or a friend.

It is only kindness that makes sense anymore. It's not enough to claim it, or pray for it, we must practice it until it goes with us everywhere.

Chris Abani is an award-winning novelist, playwright, poet and essayist who grew up in Nigeria with an Igbo father and English mother. In a TED talk several years ago, Abani talks about his search for the stories of ordinary people that offer transcendence and lead to transformation and are never sentimental. He does not believe that the world is saved in grand gestures, but in small almost invisible acts of compassion.

Abani tells the story about his mother, small in stature, 5'2", but bold in spirit. The family, with five small children, were caught in the Biafra war. It took one year, through refugee camp after refugee camp, to leave Nigeria. And I now quote Abani, "At every single refugee camp, my mother had to face off soldiers who wanted to take my elder brother, Mark, who was nine, and make him a boy soldier. Imagine this five-foot-two woman standing up to men who want to kill us with guns. All through that year, my mother never cried one time, not once. But when we were in Lisbon, in the airport, about to fly to England, this woman saw my mother wearing this dress, which had been washed so many times it was basically see through, with five really hungry-looking kids. This woman came over and asked my mother what had happened. And so she told her. And this woman emptied out her suitcase and gave all of her clothes to my mother, and to us, and the toys of her kids...that was the only time my mother cried. And I remember years later, I was writing about my mother, and I asked her, 'Why did you cry then?' And she said, 'You know, you can steel your heart against any kind of trouble, any kind of horror. But the simple act of kindness from a complete stranger will unstitch you.'" (Chris Abani, "On Humanity" [https://www.ted.com/talks/chris\\_abani\\_muses\\_on\\_humanity?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_abani_muses_on_humanity?language=en)

## Grow Goodness

This Lent, we have been looking at the fruit of the spirit that the apostle Paul writes about in his letter to the Galatians. It's a letter to a church struggling to find its identity – free in Christ. The only thing that counts, he says, is faith working through love.

The 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Galatians emphasizes the church's call to freedom in Christ. It is freedom for the purpose of serving others, and not for self-service or self-indulgence.

I grew up reading the *Peanuts* comic strips, and this admonition by Paul reminded me of the comic of Lucy and Linus. Lucy swings on a swing while Linus reads from a book. "It says here that the world revolves around the sun once a year." Lucy replies, "The world revolves around the sun? Are you sure? I thought it revolved around me."

Paul reminds the church that true freedom is loving others. Paul quotes Jesus, saying that the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

And as we continue to follow Jesus, Paul says, God brings gifts into our lives, a little like the way fruit appears in an orchard. In contrast to a world that revolves primarily around seeking our own appetites and indulging our own comfort, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

The "fruit" are to be received as gifts from God and put into practice in our lives. Living by the Spirit, we are guided by the Spirit.

In thinking about goodness, I immediately went to Genesis. God created the world, created human beings, and called it good. Yes, we are broken, we are flawed, we mess up and hurt ourselves, God, one another and the earth. We do. But goodness is at the center of our God-created being, and cultivating that deep knowledge in ourselves and reflecting it in others is part of our life work as followers of Jesus.

Chris Abani, whose story I told earlier, talks about our common humanity in terms of the African philosophy of ubuntu. Ubuntu declares I am because we are. We need each other. The only way for me to be human is to have my humanity reflected back by you.

Jesus puts it this way, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This is much more than just being nice!

Jesus models doing unto others as he acknowledged the essence of goodness, the worthiness, in others that were forgotten. He physically touched people that others wouldn't come near, he allowed children to sit on his lap, and kissed the cheek of the one who would betray him. He ate with outsiders, called a tax collector into his inner circle and included women in his ministry.

Opportunities for small acts of goodness abound. Three short illustrations:

This week I was touched by the show of unity and compassion in New Zealand as masses of women wore hijabs in solidarity with their Muslim neighbors after the shootings in two mosques in Christchurch.

And I wince as I remember the time Milissa Carter and I were in St. Louis for the NEXT Church Conference. As we walked through the city to get coffee one cold morning, we walked past a man sleeping in an office entryway. I didn't see him, focused as I was on the conversation, but Milissa did, and bought him coffee and a warm breakfast.

A four-year-old girl lived next door to an elderly man whose wife died. One day, the little girl saw the man on his porch chair, crying. She walked across the lawn and crawled up into his lap, and just sat there. Later, when her mother asked what she'd said to the man, the girl said, “Nothing, I just helped him cry.” (Uncommon Stories and Illustrations by Jim Burns, pg. 123.)

My friend Steven writes, “The greatest gift we can give another is to be a mirror where they can see a reflection of their own goodness.”

May the spirit allow us to kindle kindness and grow goodness all the days of our lives.  
AMEN