

3 guys, 1 RV, and 10,000 miles...What could go wrong?

Alex Radelich, Theodore Thatcher, and Dalton Lemert embarked on a crazy adventure with one simple and central purpose: to be committed to kindness.

In the midst of exams at Purdue University, Alex was watching the movie *Evan Almighty*. Steve Carrell, who plays a Noah-like character, asks, "How can we change the world?" God, in the form of Morgan Freeman (of course), replies, "One act of random kindness at a time."

A team formed, and thus a movement was quickly in the making: Acts of Random Kindness (now known as Explore Kindness)¹. The front page of their old website said this:

ARK Project started with a simple question:

"What would happen if kindness became normal?"

With that in mind, we took to the town, looking to meet a need or even a want. We found out kindness is more than just a good idea, it's transformational. See a want? Meet a need. Every Act of Random Kindness has the capacity to change someone's life.²

These guys have done some pretty incredible things: took at-risk kids to Disney, rented an ice-cream truck and gave away ice-cream, helped plan an elaborate proposal, and they put on a senior citizen prom. They have a huge list!

The one that caught my attention was called: Take What You Need. Give What You Can.

Alex and his crew put 20 \$1 bills on a bulletin board, and then displayed it on a busy walkway at Mission Beach in San Diego. People stopped to take selfies with the board of money, while many added cash to the board. Within 45min the sum had doubled.

One man, who admits he is poor and needy, says on camera: "It makes your brain really scramble and think...it makes you really wonder what's going on there when you see all that money floating. It actually makes your brain think how many people are out here doing the right thing." When asked if he wanted to take a couple dollars for himself, he responds: "Not really, because there's so many hundreds of other people in more need than I am. As long as I got my mental health and meal for tomorrow, I'm not greedy. I mean, greed is one of the worst things you can have. It destroys friendships, marriages, love,..it destroys a lot of things. Trust and friendship are worth more than gold."³

The man speaks deep truth, but he also reveals a possible flaw in the experiment. People will give. People do give. But people are hesitant to draw attention to their need. People are reluctant when it comes to *taking*...even *receiving* is difficult. One gentleman, who admits in conversation about needing help with bills and rent, refuses to take money off the board. Even after the money has been put into his hand, he stares at it in disbelief with tears in his eyes.

Hold onto "Take What You Need. Give What You Can," and we'll come back to it later.

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The Holy Spirit rocked my world a few years ago when studying this Gospel passage.⁴ This passage got flipped upside down in a way I never expected, and it continues to resonate, it continues to convict me. I've always heard this passage taught and preached in a way that lifted the widow up as a shining example of faith and gratitude. I've always heard that Jesus praises the woman for her great faith and profound stewardship.

But I see no words of praise.

Yes, I think the widow occupies a place of honor. Yes, Jesus does say that her meager gift is greater than those giving large sums. But Jesus does NOT say to his disciples, "You should live and be like the widow." So, the words of Jesus are NOT words of praise. I hear the words of Jesus as a lament.

Jesus laments that the systems of culture, religion, and society devour the meager resources of the widowed and poor. Jesus laments that there are systems that create an environment in which a poor widow would feel compelled to give all that she had to live on.

Jesus laments that there are those with abundance who live from a perspective of scarcity, while there are those who have so little and live from a perspective of abundance.

Jesus laments for those who can't find work. Jesus laments for those who are underpaid. Jesus laments for those who lack the resources to survive and live on the edge day to day. Jesus laments for the elderly who don't receive the care and companionship they need. Jesus laments for those who are discriminated against because of their race or ethnicity. Jesus laments for all who are exploited, oppressed, lost, and neglected.

So, where is the Good News? What is the Good News of God in Christ today?

Jesus sees the widow. In the midst of the cacophony of the Temple, the elites parading around, Jesus saw the widow. I doubt even the disciples would have noticed her. **But Jesus saw her**, called attention to her, and lifted her up...not as an example of generous giving, but lifted her up as an example of one deserving of God's care and empathy. God cares for the widowed, the poor, and the struggling. And so further, God sees us...God cares for us.

In the midst of our struggles and challenges, God sees us and cares for us. God recognizes where we are hard pressed to make ends meet...financially, culturally, emotionally, and spiritually. And God is there WITH us.

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Did you know there is a substantive difference between *sympathy* and *empathy*?⁵ The difference is what moves and enables us to truly ease pain and suffering. The difference is what allows us to create and establish a genuine connection.

Sympathy is a feeling of pity or sorrow for someone else's misfortune. The thing about sympathy is that it permits you to maintain distance. With sympathy, you might look at someone over there and say: "Oh man...that's bad." When I think of sympathy, I think of what my dad calls *rubber-neckers*. You know the folks that drive by a wreck or a hot-mess really slow... "Oh man, that's bad...that's REAL bad. I feel sorry for them."

Sympathy allows us to keep on moving and keep a distance. Sympathy is all about disconnection.

Empathy, however, is all about connection. The very substance of empathy is connection. Empathy is driven and fueled by connection. Empathy is feeling WITH people.

There are 4 Qualities of Empathy according to nursing scholar Theresa Wiseman:⁶

- + **Perspective taking** and recognizing another's perspective as truth
(In other words: To be able to see the world as others see it)
- + To be **nonjudgmental**
- + **Recognizing emotion** in other people
- + **Communicating** your understanding of that emotion

When someone is in a dark place, a pit or a rut, when someone is in a place of oppression and degradation, and they call out: "HELP! It's dark! I'm overwhelmed! I'm lost! I'm stuck!" Empathy climbs down into that dark place...that pit. Empathy says, "You're not alone. I know what it's like down here." Or, "Tell me what's it like down here."

Empathy is an untidy process, and yet empathy is a sacred and holy space. It gets down into the muddle and chaos; it is vulnerable, difficult, and messy work. Author and researcher Brené Brown says that empathy is vulnerable because, "In order to connect with you, I have to connect with something in myself that knows that feeling."⁷

And so, we can say that empathy, this vulnerable being with, is incarnational. Empathy is cut from the cloth of that which is God as Emmanuel, God WITH.

Empathy is not about solving a problem or fixing an issue. It is not about making someone feel better or diverting one's attention. It is not about finding the silver lining.

Empathy is about listening. Empathy is about presence. Empathy is being WITH.

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So that Good News? The Good News is that God cares for us. God cares for you. AND...God invites us, invites you, to care for others, too.

God is inviting us to see the lost, oppressed, and neglected...to see the systems and structures that fail them. And further, God is inviting us to care for them, to be with them in the midst of their struggles and heartache. And by doing so, we advocate for and create a new system that will not leave people behind.

It's as if we Jesus followers are to wear signs across our hearts that say:
Take What You Need. Give What You Can.

And instead of dollar bills, our currency is empathy and love.

Another way to say it is like this:

I'm here to love you when you need it. Love others when they need it.

And that's the thing. When our currency is love, when we have to put in and give of our heart, there is no choice but to give all that we have and all that we are. Love is a whole-hearted thing. We don't love half-hearted. We love whole-hearted. We love wholeheartedly because Jesus loved and gave of himself wholeheartedly.

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I attended a breakfast at WA Perry a few weeks ago. The theme was "Why Partner?" It honored current partners and sought to recruit new partners. Lee Ruef gave a beautiful testimony about the relationship that Trinity has with WA Perry. 17 years ago, it began with a simple question, the same question we ask each year: How can we be a blessing? How can we be helpful?

Ultimately, his answer to, "*Why Partner?*" → "Because there is a need."

That is at the heart of many of our relationships and ministries.

WA Perry Middle School, Homeless No More (St. Lawrence Place & the Family Shelter), Cooperative Ministries, the Sunday Breakfast, Jump Start, the Soup Kitchen, MORE Justice, even Pastoral Care, new ministries like Episcopal Veterans Fellowship, ...and so many more.

How can I help you partner with the movement of God?
What are the gifts and skills you have to offer?
What time can you give in the way of empathy and love?
Where can I connect you?

Our work, and the work of God in our hearts, begins with lament, and then moves towards hope through empathy and love.

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Alex and his team at ARK had a hashtag (a saying): #JustDoOne
Just do one act of random kindness.

I'll say this: just love one.

Just love one person at a time. And then another. And then one more. And another...

And little by little, lives are resurrected, the world is transformed, and the Kingdom of God breaks in and reigns in glory.

Just. Love. One.

¹ ARK Project is now known as Explore Kindness -- Instagram: @explorekindness

² <http://www.arkprojectnow.com/#welcomepage>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5b5wNM3t3QI>

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/pentecost-24-b-surprisingly-good-news/>

⁵ Inspired by and taken from: Brené Brown on Empathy (published on YouTube by The RSA):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

⁶ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/partnering-in-mental-health/201408/bren-brown-empathy-vs-sympathy-0>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>