

A FEW SMALL GREEN APPLES

KINDNESS

I'm convinced that the fruit of the Spirit called Kindness exists in every single one of us, all human beings, because we are all touched by God. One person, however, stands out in my life as exemplifying this gift for me in a life shaping way. He was the most important person in my life during my teenage years. I was quite aware of it even then, but as time goes on I've appreciated his kindness to me more and more, and thank God for his influence every day.

A little background and a sad story will help explain what I want to share with the reader. My older brother Roger had been the most influential person in my life during my earliest years. He really was as much a "father" to me as he was my caring older brother. Thus for me it was like a death when he graduated from high school and went off to college and then to the armed forces. I was eleven at the time. Except for a few very short visits home and occasional exchange of letters, Roger was effectively out of my life for the next eight years. He was no longer that daily presence that brought caring and comfort to me and I missed him terribly, as did my brother and sisters. He had been the stabilizing force in our home and for our family life, the only one who could deal well with our mother's drinking problem and her boyfriends. Life got more difficult for all of us when he left home.

Now let me share a little story that really illustrates the loss and loneliness that my brother's leaving home produced. It happened the summer I was 12. Two friends my age and my ten-year old younger brother and I were bored. It was a beautiful sunny afternoon with "nothing to do." I don't even remember whose idea it was, or for that matter why we even did what we did. The four of us were just talking and somehow decided that it would be a great adventure to take off and go fishing and camp overnight. We lived fairly near the Rock River and were used to fishing there. Of course we didn't ask

permission, just grabbed our cane fishing poles and some bread, both for making fish sandwiches and for bait, and took off. We had a great time. The next morning as the four of us were walking back home along the road from the river a police car passed us. We waved at the officer. Moments later the car returned and the policeman stopped and asked us if we had seen two boys who had been reported missing. He gave us the names, and as you might have surmised they were my two friends. Their mothers' had been frantic and as one would expect, had called the police who had been out searching for them for hours. The policeman asked my brother and me who we were, and said, "You weren't reported to us". To add insult to injury he then asked my friends to get into the police car and took them home, leaving my brother and me to walk home. It gave us a feeling of being unloved, but I knew that my brother would have been out looking for us.

This is just background against which something wonderful happened in my life. A family had moved into our neighborhood that same summer who had a son my age. Our group of boys was not very nice about welcoming the "new kid", especially one who was perceived as being rich. The two of us became friends and I would play with him even if the others chose not to. It just happened-or is this Providence-that this family was very active in the local Episcopal Church. That fall their priest decided to form a boys choir for the church. Since the church only had about ten boys of the age needed, he asked each one to bring a friend. Since I was the only friend that Don had to ask, he invited me. My first response was no and for the good reason that I had no dress clothes. Literally I only owned a couple of blue jeans and three sport shirts. My friend told me it wouldn't matter because we would wear cassocks, and could wear anything underneath. (It turned out that I did have to wear jeans but everyone else wore slacks, dress shirts and a tie.) At any rate I never could easily say no to anyone, so I agreed. I did not expect to take part more than a few obligatory Sundays. It turned out to be a wonderful opportunity and experience. I had never been involved in church or Sunday School before, in fact was not baptized or

confirmed. It opened a whole new world to me. The stately liturgy awed me, the sermons inspired me and the Church School classes challenged me with the stories of Jesus' life. I did not miss church or choir practice, or Sunday school for the next three years. The experience filled a void in my life and put hope in my heart.

This is where the kindest person I've ever known would come into my life. The parish priest who had formed and nurtured the boy's choir died of a heart attack. He was only 51 and it was totally unexpected, a shock to all. We choir boys found out as we gathered for our Saturday morning rehearsal. A strange priest showed up to inform us of this death, and then added the choir was as of that day disbanded. This was a double shock for me. The choir was my excuse and reason for being a part of that church family. No matter how faithful my attendance, because I wasn't baptized I was not officially a member of the church.

This was a bit of a crisis for me because I wasn't sure just what I should do. I made up my mind that when the new priest came I was going to become a member of the church. A couple of my friends in the choir understood my dilemma too. One asked his mother if he could give me a pair of slacks he had outgrown and another gave me a white dress shirt he didn't want. With money saved from mowing lawns I was able to buy a corduroy sport coat from Sears and a tie. I now could dress properly for going to church. For the next three months or so I kind of snuck in each Sunday and sat toward the back of the church, always checking the Sunday bulletin for news.

Finally one Sunday the bulletin announcement came that a new priest would be moving in that week. On the following Saturday morning there I was standing at the back of the rectory, knocking on the door. I was nervous but determined. A white haired elderly priest answered the door, but I hesitated to speak at first. I could see in the kitchen behind him that there were boxes in the process of being unpacked. My common sense told

me that this priest did not have time to talk with me. My heart sank, but I felt I just had to go on with it so I blurted out in a stuttering voice, "Father, I want to join your church." I wouldn't have blamed him if he had asked me to come back, or to make an appointment for a convenient time. And I think that I would have come back. That wasn't necessary. Instead this kindly priest smiled and welcomed me to come right in to his kitchen. Little did I know then that he was not only welcoming me into his home, but also into his heart. He cleared a space at the table and sat down with me and let me pour out my story and my heart to him. His immediate response was to assure me that we could take care of this. Then his second was to call in his wife, introduce her and then ask her to cut me another piece of pecan pie. He poured me a glass of milk. Believe me, this skinny 15 year old had never tasted anything quite so wonderful. I didn't even have the good manners to refuse a second piece. More importantly, before I left the rectory that morning a date was set for my baptism, the following Saturday, and I had been enrolled in a Confirmation Class beginning later that month. While I was taking the Confirmation Class Father also gave me instruction for serving as an altar boy. I still remain awestruck that someone could be so open and caring, kind and nurturing to a young person, a complete stranger. Needless to say, Father Harry Hilbish became a surrogate father to me for the next several years.

The next and final portion of this story is perhaps about the most significant moment in my life. Church activities became the center of my world, and serving as an altar boy my great joy. On a steamy-hot August Sunday I was serving and noticed that Father had become extra pale and that his hands were shaking. It looked to me like he was going to faint right there at the altar right in the service. Somehow he made it through the final blessing and I guided him by the arm back into the Sacristy. Normally he said a special prayer right away. This Sunday he just collapsed into a chair and sat silently, panting, for several minutes. I stood as if I were rooted to the spot right next to him. I kept thinking that I should go out and get someone to help, but at

the same time I was afraid to leave him. Finally he broke the spell by reaching up his hand and placing it on my shoulder and saying words to me that are imprinted on my mind. He said, "Larry, I don't know how much longer I will be able to go on with my ministry, and it would be wonderful to think that you might someday follow in my footsteps." All I know is from that moment on I knew in my heart that I was going to be a priest someday. It was Father Hilbish's hand and voice, but for me it was the hand and voice of God working through him. When we talked about it later, he could not remember saying this, so maybe it was really God. In any case this loving priest, the very embodiment of kindness, continued to nurture my spirituality and call to serve God for the next eleven years. In 1963, though long retired, he would walk by my side down the aisle of St. James Cathedral in Chicago as my priest sponsor for my ordination to the priesthood.

The Rev. Cn. Laurence Larson



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