

THE BROOKLYN DIVINE'S SUNDAY SERMON.

Subject: "Subject."

TEXT: "The barbarous people showed us no little kindness."—Acts xviii, 2.

My text puts us on the island of Malta, another name for Melita. This island, which has always been an important commercial centre, belonging at different times to Phoenicia, to Greece, to Rome, to Arabia, Spain, to France, now belongs to England. The area of the island is about one hundred square miles. It is in the Mediterranean sea, and of such clarity of atmosphere that Mount Etna, one hundred and thirty miles away, can be distinctly seen. The island is gloriously memorable, because the Knights of Malta for a long while ruled there, but most famous because of the apostolic shipwreck.

The bestormed vessel on which Paul sailed "laid to" on the starboard tack, and the vessel drifted probably a half an hour ere she struck at what is now called St. Paul's bay. Practical sailors have taken up the Bible account and decided beyond controversy that the place of the shipwreck. But the island which has so rough a coast is for the most part a garden. Richest fruit and a profusion of money characterise it in autumn time as now. The finest oranges, figs and apples grow there. When Paul and his comrades crawled up on the beach, saturated with salt water and hungry from long abstinence from food and shelter, the Maltese islanders, though called barbarians because they could not speak Greek, opened their doors to the shipwrecked foreigners.

Everything had gone to the bottom of the deep, and the barefooted, bareheaded apostle and ship's crew were in a condition to appreciate hospitality. About twenty-five such men as I have just mentioned, on the life station near Southampton, Long Island. They had got ashore in the night from the sea, and not a hat nor shoe had they left. They found out, as Paul and his fellow voyagers found out, that the sea is the roughest of all robbers. My text tells the ship's crew ashore on Malta, and around a hot fire drying themselves, and with the best provision the islanders can offer them. And they go into government quarters for three days to recuperate, Publius, the ruler, inviting them, although he had never seen them in the house at that time—his father down with dysentery and typhoid fever. Yes, for three months they staid on the island, watching for a ship and putting the hospitality of the islanders to a severe test. But they endured the test admirably, and it is recorded for all the ages of time that they were able to read and hear in regard to the inhabitants of Malta. "The barbarous people showed us no little kindness."

Kindness! What a great word that is. It would take a reed as long as that which the apocalyptic angel used to measure heaven to tell the length, the breadth, the height of that magnificent word. It is a favorite Bible word, and it is early launched in the book of Genesis, caught up in the book of Joshua, embraced in the book of Ruth, sworn by in the book of Samuel, crowned in the Psalms, and gloriously thronged in many places in the New Testament. Kindness! A word no more gentle than mightily. I expect it will wrestle me down before I get through with it. It is strong enough to throw an archangel. But it will be well for us to stand around it, and warm ourselves by its glow as Paul and his fellow voyagers stood around the fire on the island of Malta, and as the Maltese themselves immortal in my text by the way they treated these victims of the sea. "The barbarous people showed us no little kindness."

Kindness! All definitions of that multi-potent word break down half way. You say it is clemency, benignity, generosity; it is made up of good wishes, it is an expression of beneficence, it is a contrivance for the happiness of others. Some one says: "Why, I can give you a definition of kindness: It is sunshine of the soul, it is affection personified, it is a crowning glory, it is the combination of all graces, it is compassion, it is the perfection of gentle manliness and womanliness. Are you all through? You have made a grand failure in your definition. It cannot be defined. But we all know what it is, for we all felt its power. Some of you may have felt it as Paul felt it, off some coast of rock as the ship went to pieces, but not here. We have again and again in some awful stress of life had either from earth or heaven hand stretched out, which "showed us no little kindness."

There is a kindness of disposition, kindness of word, kindness of act, and there is Jesus Christ, the impersonation of all of them. Kindness! You cannot affect it, you cannot play it as a part, you cannot feign it, you cannot dramatise it. By the grace of God you must have it inside you, an everlasting, summer, or rather a combination of June and October, the geniality of the one and the sanctity of the other. It cannot dwell with arrogance or spite or revenge or malevolence. At its first appearance in the soul these Amalekites and Gergisites and Hittites and Jebusites must quit, and quit forever.

Kindness wishes everybody well, every man well, every woman well, every child well, every bird well, every horse well, every dog well, every cat well. Give this spirit full swing, and you would have no more need of societies for prevention of cruelty to animals, no more need of protective sewing societies, and no more need of would dull every sword until it would not cut skin deep, and unwholesome every battery till it could not roll, and make gunpowder of no more use in the world except for rock blasting or pyrotechnic celebration.

Kindness is a spirit divinely implanted, and in answer to prayer, and then to be religiously cultivated, or exposed to its nature with a perfume richer and more pungent than mignonette, and as if you put a tuft of that aromatic beauty behind the clock on the mantel or in some corner where nobody can see it, you find people walking about your room looking this way and that, and you ask them: "What are you looking for?" And they answer: "Where is that flower?" So it is with kindness. Its finite sweetness of disposition its perfume will waft everything.

But if you are waiting and hoping for some one to be bankrupt or exposed or disgraced or in any way overthrown, then kindness has not taken possession of your nature. You are wrecked on a Malta where there are no oranges. You are entertaining a guest so unlike kindness that kindness will not come and dwell under the same roof. The most exhausting and unhealthy and ruinous feeling on earth is a revengeful spirit. I have tried it five or ten minutes at a time. When some mean thing has been done me or said about me, I will show him. The ingrate! The traitor! The liar! The villain!

But five or ten minutes of the feeling has been so unwholesome and exhausting that I have abandoned it, and I cannot understand how people can go about torturing themselves five or ten or twenty years, trying to get even with somebody. The only way you will ever triumph over your enemies is by forgiving them and wishing them all good and no evil. As malevolence is the most unwholesome and dangerous and delinquent, and the most healthful and delightful. And this is not an abstraction. As I have tried a little of the retaliation, so I have tried a little of the forgiving.

I do not want to leave this world until I have taken vengeance upon every man that ever did me a wrong by doing him a kindness. In most of such cases I have already succeeded but there are a few malignants whom I am yet pursuing, and I shall not be content until I have in some wise helped them or benefited them or blessed them.

Let us all pray for this spirit of kindness. It will settle a thousand questions, it will change the phase of everything. It will melt through and through our entire nature. It will transform a lifetime. It is not a feeling gotten up for occasions, but perennial.

That is the reason I like petunias better than morning glories. They look very much alike, and if I should put in a row of petunias and a row of morning glories, you could hardly tell which is the petunia and which the morning glory; but the morning glory blooms only a few hours and then shuts up for the day, while the petunia is in as widespread a glow at twelve o'clock as at noon and six o'clock in the evening as at sunrise. And the grace of kindness is not spasmodic, is not intermittent, is not for a little while, but it irradiates the whole nature, all through and clear on till the sunset of our earthly existence.

Kindness! I am resolved to get it. Are you resolved to get it? It does not come by haphazard, but through culture under the divine help. Thistles grow without culture. Rocky mountains and grass grow without culture. Mulled wine grows without culture. But that great red rose in the conservatory, its leaves packed on roses, deep dyed as though it had been obliged to fight for its beauty and its life, that rose needed to be cultured, and through long years its floral ancestors were cultured. To God, the implant kindness in all our souls, and then give us grace to watch it, to enrich it, to develop it!

The king of Prussia had presented to him by the empress of Russia the root of a rare lower, and it was put in the royal gardens in an island, and the head gardener, Herr Fintelmann, was told to watch it. And one day it put forth its glory. Three days of very week the people were admitted to see the flower, and a young man, probably not realizing what a wrong he was doing, plucked this flower and put it in his buttonhole, and the gardener arrested him as he was crossing the lawn, and asked the king to take care of his more his gardens to the public. The king replied: "Shall I deny the thousands of good people of my country the privilege of seeing the flower because one young man has done wrong? No, let them come and see the beautiful grounds."

And when the gardener wished to give the king the name of the flower which had been the royal flower, he said, "No, my memory is very treacherous and I do not want to have in my mind the name of the offender, lest it should hinder me granting him a favor some day." Now, I want you to know that kindness is a royal flower, and blessed be God, the King of mercy and grace, that by a divine gift and by purifying the heart, this royal flower may not rest on the outside of our nature, but wear it on our soul and wear it forever, its radiance and aroma not more wonderful for the ages than wonderful for eternity.

Still further, I must speak of kindness of word. When you meet anyone do you say pleasant thing or an unpleasant? Do you say him of agreeable things you have heard about him, or the disagreeable? When he leaves you does he feel better or does he feel worse? Oh, the power of the tongue for the production of happiness or misery! One would think that from the way the tongue is used in me might take the hint that it is a dangerous power. First, it is chained to the back of the mouth by strong muscles. Then it is narrowed by the teeth of the lower jaw, so many ivory bars, and then by the teeth of the upper jaw, more ivory bars. Then outside of all these are the two lips with the power of compression and arrest, and yet notwithstanding these four imprisonments or limitations, how many take no hint in regard to the dangerous power of the tongue, and the results and denunciations, and damnations.

There are those if they know a good thing about you and a bad thing, will mention the bad thing and not as though they had never heard of the good thing. Now there are two ways to almost every one's character, and we have the choice of overhauling the virtue or the vice. We can greet Paul and the ship's crew as they come up the beach of Malta with a friendly word. "What a sorry looking set you are! How little of navigation you must know to run on these rocks! Didn't you know better than to put out on the Mediterranean in this wintery month? It was not much of a ship anyhow, or it would not have come to pieces so soon as that. Well, what do you want? We have had enough work to make a living for ourselves, without having thrust on us two hundred and seventy-six ragamuffins."

Not so, said the Maltese. I think they said: "Come in! Sit down by the fire and warm yourselves. Glad that you all got off with your lives. Make yourselves at home. You are welcome to all we have until some ship comes in sight and you resume your voyage. Here, let me put a bandage on your forehead, for that ugly gash you got from the floating timber, and here is a man with a broken arm. We will have a doctor come to attend to this fracture." And though for three months the kindness went on, we have but little more than this brief record. "The barbarous people showed us no little kindness."

Oh, say the cordial thing! Say the useful thing! Say the hospitable thing! Say the helpful thing! Say the Christlike thing! Say the kind thing! I admit that this is easier for some temperaments than for others. Some are born pessimists, and some are born optimists, and that demonstrates itself all through everything. It is a cloudy morning. You meet a pessimist and you say: "What weather do you expect, answers, 'It's going to storm,' and umbrella under arm and a waterproof overcoat show that he is honest in that utterance. On the same block, a minute after, you meet an optimist and you say: "Good weather, this is only a fog and will soon scatter." The absence of umbrella and absence of waterproof overcoat show that it is an honest utterance.

On your way at noon to luncheon you meet an optimistic merchant and you say: "What do you think of the commercial prospects?" and he says: "Glorious! Great crops must bring great business. We are going to have such an autumn and winter of prosperity as we have never seen." On your way back to your store you meet a pessimistic merchant. "What do you think of the commercial prospects?" you ask. And he answers: "Well, I don't know. So much grain will surfeit the country. Farmers have more bushels but less prices, and the grain gamblers will get their fit in. There is the McKinley bill, and the hay crop is short in some places, and in the southern part of Wisconsin they had a hail storm, and our business is as dull as it ever was. You will find the same difference in judgment of character. A man of good reputation is assailed and charged with unwelcome will. As the first story the pessimist will believe in guilt. "The papers said so, and that's enough. Down with him." The optimist will say: "I don't believe a word of it. I don't think a man that has been as useful and seemingly honest for twenty years could have got off the track like that. There are two sides to the story, and I will wait to hear the other side before I condemn him." My hearer, if you are by nature a pessimist, make a special effort by nature's integrity. And if guilt by proof, and the hypocritical from your disposition. Believe nothing against anybody until the wrong is established by at least two witnesses of integrity. And if guilt by proof, find out the extenuating circumstances if there are any.

And then commit to memory so that you can quote for yourself and quote for others that exquisite thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians about charity that suffers long and is kind, and hopes all things and suffers all things. By day, by night, in public and in private, says all the good about people you can think of, and if there be nothing good, then tighten the chain of words on the back end of your tongue, and keep the ivory bars of teeth on the lower jaw closed and the gate of your lip tightly closed and your tongue shut up.

It is a peace between you and so many, and all the other cities and neighborhoods, if you live in charity dominated! What if all the young and old possessors were dead! The Lord hasten their funeral! What if little children and widows were out of favor! What if in ciphering out the value of other people's character, in our moral arithmetic, we stuck to addition instead of subtraction! Kindness! Let us meet at noon and pray for it until we get it. When you can speak a good word for so many speak it. If you can connectively give letter of commendation, give it. Watch for opportunities for doing good fifty years after you are dead.

All my life has been affected by the letter of commendation that the Rev. Dr. Van Vranken, of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, wrote for me, a boy under him, when I was seeking a settlement in which to preach that year. The letter gave me my dead more than thirty years, yet I feel the touch of that magnificent old professor. Strange kindness! It was I who received Rocky mountain grass grown without culture. Mulled wine grown without culture. But that great red rose in the conservatory, its leaves packed on roses, deep dyed as though it had been obliged to fight for its beauty and its life, that rose needed to be cultured, and through long years its floral ancestors were cultured. To God, the implant kindness in all our souls, and then give us grace to watch it, to enrich it, to develop it!

Furthermore, there is kindness of action. That is what Joseph showed to his outrageous brothers. That is what David showed to Mephibosheth his father Jonathan's sake. That is what David showed to Paul in the Roman pentecost. That is what William Cowper recognized when he said he would not trust a man who would not assist his horse and his dog. That is what Lincoln demonstrated when his private secretary found him in the Capitol grounds trying to get a horse and which quality the illustrious man exhibited years before, when saving with some lawyers in the carriage on the way to court he saw a poor man and his wife, and he said to the gentleman, "I must go back and help that hog out of the mire." And he did so, and put on the ground his most uninteresting quality.

That was the spirit that was manifested by my departed friend, Honorable Alexander H. Stephens, of Georgia (and I doubt not that he was in the same spirit when at Washington. A senator's wife was told my wife of the circumstances, said to me, "Mr. Stephens, come and see my dear husband. He is answered, 'No, I could not look at a man who would not assist his horse and his dog.' That is the spirit that Grant showed when at the surrender at Appomattox he said to General Lee, "As long as you are a soldier, I will give you the horses and mules to raise the crops to keep your families from suffering next winter, let each Confederate man own a horse or mule." That is the spirit which, last night, ten thousand mothers showed to their sick children, coming to give the drink at the twentieth and as cheerfully and as tenderly as at the first.

Suppose all this assemblage, all to whom these words shall come by printer's type, should resolve to make kindness an over-riding principle in their lives, and to carry out the principle of their life, and then carry out the resolution—why, in six months the whole world would feel it. People would say: "What a wonderful change! It seems to me that the world is getting to be a better place to live in. Why, life after all is worth living. Why, there is Shylock, my neighbor, who has withdrawn his lawsuit of foreclosure against me, and he has become a more kind man, so much kindness in his family he is going to have the house for one year rent free. There is an old lawyer in that corner who has been a miser, but he has given up a case which was too big for the young man to handle, and the white haired man in the next room, who has been a miser, is making out a list for the poor. Down at the bank I heard yesterday a note was due, and the young merchant could not pay it, and the old merchant went in and said, 'I will take care of it, and I will make it up to you.' There is a difference between bankruptcy and success in business. And in our street is an old man who has been a miser, but he has given up a case which was too big for the young man to handle, and the white haired man in the next room, who has been a miser, is making out a list for the poor. Down at the bank I heard yesterday a note was due, and the young merchant could not pay it, and the old merchant went in and said, 'I will take care of it, and I will make it up to you.' There is a difference between bankruptcy and success in business. And in our street is an old man who has been a miser, but he has given up a case which was too big for the young man to handle, and the white haired man in the next room, who has been a miser, is making out a list for the poor. 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