Columns
Spirituality



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Rachel Remen writes in her book *My Grandfather's Blessings* that, "We can only bless one life at a time."

My guess is that we all know the story of the man walking on a beach covered with hundreds of stranded starfish. He throws one starfish back into the ocean; another beach walker tells him to save his time and effort because it won't make a difference. It "makes a difference for that one," the man responded. If a man on a beach throwing a starfish back into the ocean had been a cartoon, the man would get feedback right between the time the starfish left his hand and hit the water. Perhaps the echinoderm would have made eye contact and said, "Thanks, Bud, for sending me home. You just saved my life."

Two years ago, I ran into a former student in an aisle at Macy's 25 years after I taught her. She was a junior in my class then; today she is a pediatrician with a thriving practice. "When I was in high school," K. said, "you taught me how to think outside the box and it has served me well ever since." Her statement took my breath away. I never knew that. Never knew that she got my message. Just hoped that she did. That everyone in the class did.

In a coffee shop not long ago, I was surprised to see another former student ahead of me in line. We sat and shared memories as we sipped our brews. "You were my first existential teacher," she told me. (Existential! Who knew?) "What did I teach you?" I asked. "You taught me that happiness is a choice and I have taught that to all of my children." C. not only bought my coffee, she also gifted me with the kind of reaction that most teachers never get. I bought her a doughnut to go with her drink. A small price to pay.

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I don't tell these stories to gloat. It is not about me blessing them, but about them blessing me. I am grateful for their comments, even 25 years later. It's probably a good thing it took so long. If they had told me then, I might have tried harder and wrecked it.

We can bless only one life at a time. Good thing we don't do it for compliments or thanks. Jesus got that. All through the Gospels we find him interacting one-on-one. But at the end he was alone. "I do not know the man." (Mt 26:72) Not enough help

for him at that moment. Come on, Peter, you could have had his back. You could have blessed the moment.

My world. Your world. His world. They add up. Ultimately it is not about getting a response. It is about being kind and generous. One moment at a time.

Addressing a server in a restaurant by name. Telling the manager that checkout clerk did a great job. Thanking your dentist for being gentle. Buying a sandwich for a homeless person. Taking soup to a sick neighbor. Waving to a driver who let you into a lane. Holding the elevator. Sending a cheery card or note. Calling home.

If we pay attention, such blessings can happen every day as we come face to face with a person who might need a kind word, a recognition of their presence or an encouraging gesture. In an elevator, on the street, in a doughnut shop or at a shopping mall. Or in a classroom. Maybe someone needs to feel that they have been seen. That they matter. That they have value.

I do believe Rachel Remen. And I believe Jesus. So. If Rachel's statement isn't enough for you, let's go back. Say, 2000-plus years to see what Jesus has to say about this. He often did one-on- one blessings. He did it because it mattered. It impacted lives. It transformed the world.

The sisters of Lazarus. The woman caught in adultery. Perfuming the feet of Jesus. Daughter of Jairus. The leper. The sick man lowered through the roof. The centurion’s servant. The woman at the well. The man with a shriveled hand. The deaf mute. The widow's son. The possessed boy. And many more

By his example, Jesus calls us to be a blessing to each other. We are all capable of changing the world. One person at a time. One neighborhood at a time. One parish at a time. It is up to us to keep it going. To establish a pattern.

It doesn't take a genius or a saint. It just takes a generous heart and a willingness to be open to the moment. No one can create the moment. It creates itself at unexpected times and in unexpected places. It doesn't take much energy and doesn't get a lot of acknowledgment.

Until. Maybe. Just maybe. Twenty-five years later.