**Connection in Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

For reasons not quite known to me, some of my most interesting encounters with strangers seem to happen at bus stops. Recently, one of my favorites of these random exchanges took place.

He was a little boy of three, or perhaps four at the most. He was impatient in a happy way – a merry mindset that eludes me on public transit. At his mother’s insistence, he was still bundled up for winter, but we all knew that spring was not far away. He told me his name and I told him mine. He was impressed – I think – that I knew the names of the cartoon characters on his jacket. Having someone in my family about his age helped!

In his hand, he held the universal treasure of children his age: a plastic bag of goldfish crackers. Unexpectedly, he reached into the bag, pulled out a handful and offered them to me. It was the simplest of offerings -- crumbly crackers in tiny fingers at a bland bus stop. Yet, surprisingly, it choked me up a bit.

This was not the first time a young child offered me food this way. I am blessed! But, I think it meant so much this time because such connections with strangers seem rarer and, thus, more special.

In the past two years, we have kept our distances, had our smiles masked away, and seen so many gatherings cancelled. For many, it seems, the “new normal” is to spend time alone, on-line, at home, and a wide berth away from each other.

In the past few weeks, we read the newspapers and watch television and see the horrors of war unfolding in real time, and wonder how this human cruelty can be.

Sunday after Sunday, we see so many are missing from our pews. Some may no longer be able to come. Many have grown disconnected from parish families for other reasons – reasons as unique as the people who are missing.

Day after day, so many of the meetings and conferences we used to have together are now on Zoom – convenient but sterile and detached.

Disputes about politics, economics, the social fabric, and even theology have spawned a public discourse that quickly tears down, but neglects to build up.

Violence in our cities can easily make us suspicious and guarded around each other. Exhaustion from the walk through life can make even the most kind-hearted among us less willing to help another bear life’s load.

So, in these days where the world seems so disconnected and isolated, a warm-hearted young stranger reached into a plastic bag coated with cheddar dust and offered me a treasure wrapped in tiny fingers. To see the pure, joy-filled and uncomplicated nature of his offering warmed my heart. It told me that there is good, there is kindness, there is generosity even when the world can seem particularly cruel and cold. It was a beautiful reminder that we are made for good, and, yes, a reminder that it is often wise to let little children lead us.

I hope that as my friend advances in years he does not lose his instinct for kindness. I hope that God blesses the adults in his life who have taught him to do good.

And, I hope that those of us who are far further along life’s journey can, like him, look for those ways to reach out to those who come into our paths. We may have more to share than goldfish crackers. Sometime, we may have less. But in an age when so much keeps us apart, maybe the grace to pray for is to follow my friend’s simple spirit of kindness. May the days ahead give us chances to reach out to each other with the treasures and connections that can bind us together in ordinary times.

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