

“Paying it forward”

Romans 14:7-9

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Boredom can lead to some incredibly creative moments. Stuck inside for weeks and months on end, some talented young minds have set to design the most amazing tricks with dominoes. They stack dominoes up and down staircases, out windows, across halls, around tables and chairs, knocking over buckets and starting balls that roll and levers that release and the dominoes just keep falling and falling and it really is breathtaking to watch it play out. If you are the observer you can see it all coming to life, falling into place, triggering the next step. But what if you were the domino? No one gives you a heads up. No one warns you. You don't see it coming. You are just standing there, straight and tall, in the right place, minding your own business, when all the sudden the guy in front of you topples into you and you fall and knock over the next guy, and your whole world is upset.

Julie got caught up in a situation sort of like dominoes. It was a morning like every other when we lived in Houston. She was up early, got ready for work, prepared herself to face the terrible freeway traffic, and braced herself by getting into the drive-thru line at a Starbucks. Nothing like a big cup of caffeine to get you ready to face rush hour. I guess the morning was not like every other. Usually, she takes the time to go into the coffee shop and place her order. As you can imagine, with her personality she had made friends with all of the staff at the store. But that day she was rushing so she used the drive-thru.

Well, the morning really was not like every other morning. She placed her order at the drive-thru and pulled up to the window to pay. The person working at the window said, “The car in front paid for your coffee.” Boom! She was a domino. The domino in front had paid for her coffee, tipping over into her. What could she do? Knowing she had no choice, Domino Julie said, “I'll pay for the car behind me.” And just like

that, she had tumbled into the car behind her. All those cars lined up for coffee, they had no idea. They were all just dominoes. They had no choice but to be tipped over and knock down the domino behind them. The next morning, she went into the coffee shop, and she said, "I'm just curious. Yesterday somebody paid for my coffee in the drive-thru, and I paid for the person behind me. I thought it was really nice" The person at the coffee shop smiled and said 161 people did the exact same thing as Julie. Domino Julie knocked was knocked over by Domino John Doe and Domino Julie then knocked over Domino Jane Doe and 161 dominoes tumbled and tumbled. And they all had no choice. They were all just dominoes getting knocked over into one another.

My domino theory does not hold up for one simple reason. Domino 161, whoever they are, did not choose to fall over and knock down the next domino. Domino 161 had their coffee paid for by domino 160, but they chose not to pay for Domino 162. The whole thing came to an abrupt halt. I am not judging Domino 161. I'm just stating a fact. Who knows, maybe a school bus got in line behind Domino 161 and Domino 161 said, "No way!" But whatever happened, Domino 161 shows this really was not an involuntary happening. Each person whose coffee was paid for could not pay the person back. Instead, they paid it forward by paying for the person behind them. They chose to pay it forward. They made a decision to pay it forward.

Although the Domino theory does not hold up, I do like using the coffee drive-thru as an example. A person does something kind for you. In response you do something kind for another person. We don't know what happened to cause the person in front of us to do what they do, and we don't know what the person after us will do, but we know this much. Someone has done something for us, and we have the chance to do something for someone else. We have the chance, and we also have the choice.

Today I am preaching about paying it forward. My sermon text is Romans 14:7-9, where Paul writes, "None of us lives to himself alone,

and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.” I chose that passage because of a wonderful friend of mine named Jeanne who loved to knock over dominoes. My wonderful friend Jeanne took great delight in knocking over dominoes. In one sense, her life purpose was to knock over dominoes.

One day I went to visit some members of our church in Houston, and I was amazed by what I discovered. I rang the doorbell at the first home I wanted to visit. When the church member opened the door they said, “Oh, Jeanne was just over a few minutes ago.” I had a nice visit and left to make another call. I rang the doorbell at the second house. Again, the person who answered the door said, “Oh, Jeanne was just over a few minutes ago.” I asked in all seriousness, “How far ahead of me is she?” When I found out I was only behind by a few minutes I raced to my next stop. When the person opened the door I blurted out, “How long ago did Jeanne leave?” They overcame their shock and said, “She just left.” I never caught up to Jeanne that day, but I have to tell you, I obviously have never forgot that day. House after house, person after person, Jeanne came by to bring a word of cheer, a listening ear, a thoughtful smile, and a big heaping dose of love. At each home she knocked over a domino. I wonder what each of those people Jeanne visited did after she visited. Did they make a call to someone? Did they write a note? Did they make a batch of cookies or a loaf of bread? You knock a domino over, and you never know what will happen next.

Jeanne loved to play dominoes. There was a ministry in Houston that would fly kids in from Central America who needed surgeries that could only be done in a big hospital like the ones in Houston. Jeanne would pick the children up at the airport, drive them to the hospital, and when they had healed, she would drive them back to the airport and put them on a plane home. Clunk...who knows what dominoes fell in Central America after her act of kindness.

We had mentors at an elementary school. Jeanne mentored several kids. Clunk...who knows what those kids have done now as a result of their domino getting tipped over by a kindhearted volunteer who read and listened and played games with them.

Jeanne wanted the members of our church to be connected with each other. She got 12 volunteers and formed a Caring Committee. Everybody on the committee had a certain number of names they were responsible for, to call, to visit, to check in with at church. She lined up her 12 volunteers and all the members of church, she got everybody in line, got all the dominoes in place, and tipped them over....who knows what happened as a result of all those dominoes tumbling into one another. Clunk, clunk, clunk...

I have often wondered what domino knocked over on Jeanne to cause her to spend her life knocking over other dominoes. Jeanne lived in New Orleans when a huge storm ripped through town and left a wake of destruction. Did somebody do something kind for Jeanne and her family after that storm that changed her life? Jeanne went through a divorce that was painful. Did someone reach out to her as she grieved the loss of a marriage? Jeanne went through the great sadness of burying a son who just a young boy. Was someone there to comfort her and hold her while her heart was breaking? I never knew what domino knocked over into her to cause her to spend her life knocking over other dominoes, until Jeanne came to the end of her life.

Jeanne got sick with cancer. She was dying from cancer. She knew she was dying from cancer. She called me up and asked me to come over and visit her. By this point Jeanne was no longer serving on committees, or mentoring young kids, or driving around making visits at homes. By this point Jeanne was done knocking over dominoes. She was under hospice care, for goodness sake. Of course, she was done knocking over dominoes. When I walked into her living room, where she was under hospice care, she had two knitting needles in her hands. Her strength was nearly gone, but she was making some booties for the feet of little children

in some foreign country. Even on her deathbed, this sweet child of God was knocking over dominoes.

That day Jeanne revealed to me who knocked over her domino. She did this by directing me to the scriptures she wanted me to read at her memorial service. As I read those scriptures it became clear the one who knocked over her domino was Jesus.

- Fear not, I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.
- I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears...this poor woman called, and the Lord hear me.
- The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.
- I am convinced that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.
- In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.
- And this one, from Romans. "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."

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Jeanne belonged to the Lord. Somewhere, sometime, someplace, at some point in her life, Jeanne had been knocked over by the love of Jesus Christ, a love so deep and so rich and so wonderful that he gave his life on the cross for her. She knew that intimately. She knew that personally. She knew that in her heart and in her soul. That love knocked her over...and for the rest of her life, she went around knocking over other dominoes, sharing God's love person by person, moment by moment, heart by heart. Jeanne spent her life paying it forward.

Today we have taken some time to recognize a very special young man who understands the importance of paying it forward. I asked Kyle Dodimead if we could do something to thank him for all the work he has done. The work he has done he has done voluntarily, selflessly, gladly, filming, editing, and producing our sermons and special music for more than 20 weeks. I asked Kyle what we could do to thank him. Kyle said, "Pay it forward." Then he told me of an organization that helped him at a low time in his life. Kyle went through cancer as a teenager. As he was going through his cancer treatments, and organization called The Tomorrow Fund helped him and his family through that difficult time. Today we dedicate the gifts that were given in honor of Kyle by paying it forward to the Tomorrow Fund. We will never know what dominoes get knocked over, but it sure is pretty special to know some lives will be changed because of a wonderful young man who understands the importance of paying it forward. I'm guessing Kyle's dad Mark is feeling pretty proud of his son for paying it forward.

I want to end my sermon with one of my favorite stories. It just so happens to be about a father and a son. It is a story about a father and son living in New York City. They had a Saturday afternoon free. It was a beautiful day, so they decided to go to Central Park. As they headed out the mom called to them, "Have a great time. And would you mind picking up a pizza on the way home. We'll have that for dinner." They went to the park. They walked and talked. The sun was shining. There was a gentle breeze. The day was glorious. They watched families, children playing in the water and running down the hills, lovers holding hands, people paddling boats, picnics being enjoyed. It was just a perfect father/son outing. Toward the end of the day, a homeless man approached them. The homeless man looked at them and said, "Can you spare some change?" On this day, on this perfect day, the father and son were so absolutely filled with the feeling of life's blessings and goodness, they responded with generosity. The father and son grabbed all the dollar bills and change they had in their pockets, and they held their hands out to the man who was homeless. They said, "Here, take what you need." Well, the man's eyes lit up. He grabbed all the dollar bills and every single coin, and he

went away like he had won the lottery. The father and son looked at each, and they just laughed. I mean, they knew they had made the day for the man who was homeless.

As they began making their way home, their hearts filled with joy and contentment, all of the sudden the dad stopped in his tracks. The son looked at him, not sure what had caused his father to be concerned on this perfect day. The dad slapped his own forehead and said, “The pizza!” Oh, the pizza. They were supposed to pick up a pizza and bring it home for dinner. And now they had given away all their money. Out of the corner of his eye the father saw the man who was homeless. With incredible embarrassment, they hung their heads and walked over to the man who was homeless. Kicking the ground and barely able to get out the words, they explained about the pizza and dinner and how they had given away all their money, and eventually they said to the man who was homeless, “Can you spare some change?” The man who was homeless gave them the most interesting look. And then, holding all the money he had so recently received in his hands, he stretched his hands out, and with a big smile he said, “Here, take what you need.”

Every time I think of that story, I am reminded everything in my hands, everything that belongs to me, everything I own, everything I possess, all that I have, every breath of my body, every beat of my heart, is a gift, a gift from God. Everything I have is a gift from the God who opened his hands and gave me the greatest gift I could ever have imagined. He opened his hands and gave me, and gave you, everything we need. What else can we do except open our hands to others and say, “Here, take what you need.” In other words, what else can we do except pay it forward? And the dominoes go clunk, clunk, clunk. Hallelujah and thanks be to God!