

“Small Things With Great Love”
Matthew 25: 34-40; 1 Corinthians 13: 1-3
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Carol Armstrong-Moore

The morning paper these days reads like an account of the end times.

Here is the Sunday *Post*:

Wildfires in the West. Flooding in the Midwest. Around the world – turmoil. The Middle East, Africa.

A long, hot, oppressive, deadly summer following the hopeful Arab Spring.

The problems of our world are so big and so complex -- it is enough to make the ordinary person feel like just giving up.

In fact, I know some people who have gone on “news fasts” – no television news, no papers for a week -- just because it can be so overwhelming to be hit with such a barrage of negativity every day.

I showed a DVD to our youth group a few weeks ago. It is called “Another World is Possible”. It features a community called The Simple Way in a poor section of Philadelphia. One part of the video juxtaposed the wealth and consumerism of the so-called “developed world” with the poverty experienced by most of the world. . . you know how heartbreaking the images of extreme poverty can be. Parts of the video were hard to watch and I was concerned about how the youth might react.

When it was over, those young people said,

with urgency and passion, “WHAT CAN WE DO?!?!?”

Such a wonderful attitude of being ready to do whatever they could to make a difference.

“WHAT CAN WE DO?!?!?”

Sadly, it seems like by the time you reach about age 40, the attitude is more like “What can we can we do?”

Why is that?

Young people want to change the world. As we grow up, we become complacent and pessimistic. We begin to believe that the problems of this world are far beyond our reach. It’s easy to be discouraged just watching the news. What can we possibly do – about violence in the Middle East or people dying of hunger-related diseases in Africa? These problems seem simply intractable. Too enormous for ordinary people to have any meaningful impact.

Perhaps some of you have seen the movie “Pay it Forward”. In it a 7th seventh grade social studies teacher challenged his students to think of one idea that could change the world. ONE idea. That could change...the WORLD!

One young man in the class took the assignment very seriously. He came up with quite a creative idea -- a sort of kindness pyramid scheme. He said: Here I am, one person. I will find three people and help them to accomplish something they could not do on their own. Then, I’ll ask them help three more people, and those to help three more people, and so on. You can see how this could grow very big, very quickly.

This movie “Pay it Forward” was based on a novel published in 2000 by Catherine Ryan Hyde.

But the concept is much older. In 1916 Lily Hardy Hammond wrote, “You don’t pay love back; you pay it forward.”

Pay it Forward – it goes back even further – way back in history. In a letter dated April 22, 1784, Benjamin Franklin wrote to Benjamin Webb:

I do not pretend to give such a Sum; I only lend it to you. When you meet with another honest person in similar Distress, you must pay me by lending this Sum to him; enjoining him to discharge the Debt by a like operation, when he shall be able, and shall meet with another opportunity. I hope it may thus go thro'

many hands, before it meets with a Knave that will stop its Progress. This is a trick of mine for doing a deal of good with a little money.

Choir: And the greatest of these is love.

One pebble in the pond of life. And the ripples go far and wide.

We do not have to leave our own church community to find examples of how love can be paid forward instead of back.

Quote:

When my husband died, one of our church members, also a widow, invited me to join her and two other widows for an evening at a dinner theater. I gladly accepted and so appreciated the company and support of my church family. When I told the woman I wanted to pay her for the theater ticket she said, "I would rather you not. Maybe you can do something for someone else." I never forgot that. When Christmastime came that year, I invited all the widows and widowers from our church to come to my house for lunch. It became a tradition that went on for years.

Choir: And the greatest of these is love.

Opportunities to perform simple acts of kindness surround us every day.

How about on the roads of the D.C. area? What happens to people when they get behind a wheel?? All common courtesy goes out the window. It's like a license to commit one random act of rudeness after another. I'll admit I sometimes fall victim to the beltway madness. I want to scream, "What is WRONG with you people!?!? Is it really that important that you get there fast and first?" I told my children that in the states of Maryland and Virginia you are not allowed to drive on the beltway until you are 30 years old.

Did you hear about the woman who called her husband on his cell phone while he was driving? She said, "Fred, be careful out there. I just heard on the radio that there's some idiot driving the wrong way on the interstate!"

Fred says, “There’s not one. There’s hundreds of them!!”

Sometimes we do get discouraged and feel that we can’t make a difference. Could it be that somewhere between the ages of 14 and 35 we lose sight of the power of the smallest acts of love?

I know someone who had a terrible, violent temper as a younger man. He told me that sometimes he could feel the rage building in him and just ready to blow. And then, just the slightest touch of his wife’s hand on his and a quiet word of assurance, gave him a way out; brought him back to himself. Based on his experience he told me that that tiniest act of love shook the very foundations of the hell he was in.

I know that you strive everyday to act in ways that are kind and loving. All I want to say this morning is:

Let us not forget what it is that we are doing.

There is a deep and powerful dimension to the simplest acts of human compassion.

In the 25th chapter of the gospel of Matthew beginning at verse 35 we read: “for I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was sick and you took care of me and the righteous will say:

WHAT? I’m sorry. I think you must be mistaken. I don’t remember visiting you when you were sick, Lord. When were you a stranger and I welcomed you?

And Jesus will say,

Remember when you went to Martha’s Table down on 14th Street with your youth group and you sliced up a gazillion apples and made sandwiches and mopped the floor and sorted clothing and picked up trash out on the sidewalk?

You did that for least of these – you did that for *me*.

I know of someone in our church who read in the paper that there was a school near her that had no books in the library. So she quietly went about collecting books from her friends and took them to the school. She gave them to the librarian with a big smile and a hug.

Jesus will say, when you did it to the least of these,
you hugged *me*!

Someone else in our congregation was teaching Sunday School one day and in the opening circle one little girl who was visiting our church said that her father had just died. Without a moment's hesitation the teacher lovingly shared that her own father had died when she was a child. Speaking simply, straight from her heart, she gave that little girl so much comfort.

When you did it to the least of these,
you comforted *me*.

Anytime, every time, you reached out with love in even the tiniest of ways,
you touched ME!!

One of the joys of preaching is that you get to meet new people when you are preparing a sermon. Last week I got to know someone named Albert Schweitzer. Of course I had heard of him but now we are on a first name basis. He is AMAZING! A musician and accomplished organist, a scholar and theologian, a pastor, and when he decided to become a missionary in Africa, he went to medical school first to become a doctor.

Now, this guy sounds superhuman, right? Like Mother Teresa. Bigger than life. Both are Nobel Peace Prize winners. Icons of spiritual greatness. Mother Teresa said,

“We can do no great things; only small things with great love.”

And here is what the amazing Albert Schweitzer has to say to us today:

Always keep your eyes open for the little task, because it is the little task that is important to Jesus Christ. The future of the Kingdom of God does not depend on the enthusiasm of this or that powerful person; those great ones are necessary too; but it is equally necessary to have a great number of little people who will do a little thing in the service of Christ.

The great flowing rivers represent only a small part of all the water that is necessary to nourish and sustain the earth. Beside the flowing river there is the water in the earth – the subterranean water – and there are the little streams which continually enter the river and feed it and prevent it from sinking into the earth. Without these other waters – the silent hidden subterranean waters and the trickling streams – the great river could no longer flow. Thus it is with the little tasks to be fulfilled by us all.

Choir: And the greatest of these is love.

The first three verses of 1 Corinthians says this of love:

If you have all kinds of great talent, if you do all sorts of fantastic good, if you even have faith – all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, you are nothing. You accomplish nothing. The world gains nothing.

Conversely, by that same logic:

If you touch one other life in the smallest of ways with the greatest of love, you have changed the world.

Because this is no ordinary love.

It is not sentiment or romance or even emotion

It is the love that pulses through our very veins

The ground of our being

The one Love that makes every other love possible.

It is God incarnate.

Let us not forget what it is that we are doing.

God is alive in us through Christ!

God's very Spirit, reaching out to reconcile the whole world through – us!

What then shall we say to this? In the 8th chapter of the letter to the Romans writes the apostle Paul:

If God is for us, who is against us?

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution or famine, or floods, or beltway traffic or tornadoes or deadly regimes in Libya and Syria or conflict in Darfur or all out warfare?

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”