

“Blessed Are Those Who Think Small”

Matthew 5:1-12

Mark 4:30-34

Luke 10:30-37

John 6:1-13

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May 15, 2011

**First United Presbyterian Church
Bellefontaine, Ohio**

Now, I want to see how many of you were really LISTENING this morning when we read our Gospel readings! Did you catch what I tried to do? I tried to pull a “fast one” on you and I want to see how many of you really noticed! How many of you heard something in the scripture readings this morning that wasn’t supposed to be there? Could you tell? What did you hear? Well, there was an extra “beatitude” in that whole list of “blessed” that wasn’t supposed to be there!

“Blessed are those who think small, for they shall be people of hope!”

No, Jesus didn’t say it. And unfortunately, it’s not part of the scriptures. Although if the church ever decides to reopen the Bible to new material, I’d sure like to slip it in as one of the beatitudes:

“Blessed are those who think small, for they shall be people of hope!”

Hope, you see, is what we all need to keep on living...to keep on keeping on in this life we’re called to live. And hope happens, I truly believe, when you can get your hands on something you can DO something about!

This past week, I went to see a family that had recently lost a loved one and, on top of that grief and sorrow, is now experiencing a number of “family problems” that are continuing to pull the family down. As if their family member passing away was not enough, their current problems are putting such a strain on the family that it’s about to pull the family apart at the seams. As I sat there listening to their problems, I felt totally helpless as to how I could help them...what I could do or say that would give them hope and strength for this most difficult time in their lives. So for an hour or so, I just basically sat there and listened to them talk...just LISTENED as they poured out their grief and sorrow and anger and frustration and fear and all the other emotions which were cascading through their hearts and minds...all the while feeling hopeless to help them.

When I got ready to leave, however, the father of the family said to me, *“Thank you so much for coming by this afternoon! You don’t know how much it means just to be able to talk and get things out that I haven’t been able to share before today. It really helped a lot!”*

And suddenly, HOPE was reborn in my heart...hope that I...hope that WE...CAN make a difference in people’s lives – not by the BIG things we do...not by SOLVING all their problems or TAKING AWAY their pain or giving them all these WONDERFULLY NEAT ANSWERS and SOLUTIONS to all their questions and concerns...but simply by doing something as small as taking the time to LISTEN and to CARE. *“It really helped a lot!”* the man said to me. And I think he really meant it. But not only did it help HIM, but it also helped ME...helped me reclaim HOPE...hope that we CAN make a difference in people’s lives...if only for a few minutes...if only to a small degree. But sometimes, that’s what matters the most...the SMALL THINGS we do that make a BIG DIFFERENCE in the lives of other people.

“Blessed are those who think small, for they shall be people of hope!”

You see, you and I...and indeed much of our society as well, I believe...has this problem with what I call “BIG-ITIS.” We’ve been taught so often and told so frequently to think BIG...to dream GREAT DREAMS and hope GREAT HOPES...that we’ve lost sight of the benefit of sometimes thinking small. Oh sure! We NEED our dreams...we NEED our hopes...we NEED to be constantly

striving to ACCOMPLISH something with our lives...with the time and talents God has given us to use for His Kingdom in this world.

The PROBLEM comes, however, when the dreams and hopes become SO large...SO grand...that we become discouraged because we can never achieve or accomplish them and therefore begin to get discouraged and loose hope. Let me show you what I mean.

I want to solve the problem of WORLD HUNGER. I have a dream of a time when no child will ever go to bed hungry again...when no one will ever die because they don't have what is the basic right of EVERY person – namely, food enough to live. But what can I do? I'm only one person. How can I even BEGIN to solve the problem?

I have a DREAM that the dreaded disease called CANCER will one day be wiped off the face of the earth. Like many of you, I have lost far too many dear friends and beloved family members to this damnable disease and I want to see it over and done with, never to cause another person to have to go through the hellacious nightmare that cancer can truly be. But what can I do? I'm not a doctor! I'm not a cancer researcher! I'm a nobody! How can I even BEGIN to solve the problem?

As Christians...as followers of Christ...we're called to go out and PROCLAIM the gospel...SPREAD THE GOOD NEWS...let others know about the love...the grace...the mercy of God that comes to us all in Christ Jesus, our Lord. THINK BIG we're told. Obey the GREAT COMMISSION! Go into ALL THE WORLD! How is it that great old evangelistic hymn used to put it: "*Christ for the WORLD we sing...the whole WORLD to Christ we bring!*"

Well, that's all fine and dandy and I'd love to do that. Those are all noble and sincere sentiments to be sure. But how in heaven's name am I supposed to bring the whole WORLD to Christ when I can't even get folks in Bellefontaine...folks in our own congregation...heavens to Betsy, when I can't even get my own CHILDREN sometimes to go to church. It's TOO BIG an assignment. It's TOO HOPELESS a dream. It's TOO FAR beyond my reach. I might as well GIVE UP if that's the magnitude of what I'm supposed to do as a follower of Jesus.

You see, discouragement in the church is often born by a lack of realism. And it's not faithlessness to confess it. It's simply honesty.

So here's the thing! Here's the thing I want you to hear today! Sooner or later, we followers of Jesus are going to have to face up to a reality that talks NOT so much about the BIG, GRAND, HUGE ideas or needs or problems of life, but about the SMALL. Because, in reality, much of our following of Jesus has to do with the LITTLE virtues of life.

Do you remember Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan? It is, to be sure, the most FAMOUS story Jesus ever told...the story of how the Samaritan, who most people considered to be the mortal enemy of the Jew, took compassion upon his Jewish neighbor in need when the Jewish man had been beaten and robbed and left for dead on the side of the road...only to be ignored and avoided by the supposedly good, righteous and upstanding leaders of Jesus society. You remember how it goes. Well, have you ever taken the time to notice the specific size and shape of the Samaritan's compassion? None of the things he did were BIG things, in and of themselves. They were LITTLE things...SMALL acts of kindness and compassion, which, when they were all added together however, probably meant life or death for that wounded man in need...which was indeed something BIG!

He cleaned the man's wounds with oil and wine.

He wrapped those wounds with bandages.

He put the wounded man on his donkey and took him to the nearest inn.

He nursed him through the night.

He paid the innkeeper for the man's lodging until he could get well.

And he promised to cover any additional cost the wounded man's care might require.

Again, NONE of those things were great big HUGE acts of kindness and mercy...but little things. But little things mean A LOT! For Jesus, in this most famous of his parables, little things constitute the very HEART of authentic religion...the very SOUL of what it means to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all you strength, and with all your mind...and to love your neighbor as yourself."

"Blessed are those who think SMALL, for they shall be people of hope!"

HOPE based on being able to get your hands on something you can DO something about. Jesus spend so much time talking about his idea that we oftentimes overlook it. He had twelve disciples...not TWELVE HUNDRED. Notice the sparrows, he said. Look at the lilies in the fields, he told us. Remember the tiny mustard seed and the little children, he encouraged us. Only five small loaves and two little fish? GREAT! Let's have a feast!

"But Jesus! Surely you can't feed SO MANY with SO LITTLE! It's too big a problem! Tell these people to go away and find their OWN food!"

"And when they were finished, the disciples gathered twelve baskets with the pieces left over from the five small loaves and the two little fish! And more than 5,000 men, not counting women and children, had been fed!"

Look at the LITTLE things so you can see the BIG things, Jesus said. Look at that teeny-weeny, itsy-bitsy, little-bitty piece of bread you hold in your hand when you take communion. Eat it! And as you chew it slowly and silently, remember the BIG things in life. Remember you come FROM God and you live BY God! Little things – like bread...and love...and grace...and mercy...and kindness...and compassion – they all mean A LOT! For out of the LITTLE things...out of that which we can get our hands on and our minds around and DO something about, HOPE is born! Hope is born when we learn to THINK SMALL!

No, I CAN'T solve the problem of WORLD HUNGER. It's just too overwhelming...too demoralizing. But I CAN help feed hungry people right here in my own community through Dinner at the Prez, Angel Food and our 2cents-a-Meal offering. I CAN give to worthy causes like One Great Hour of Sharing and Bread for the World that actually DO what they say they're going to do. I CAN support our own church members like Art and Shawn Lloyd who are going to Haiti in June and Scott Costin and Barb Neff and Brad Flora who are going to Haiti in October and Rob Stahler and his fellow classmates who going to the Dominican Republic in July – all to try to help make the lives of God's people in those places a little bit better...a little bit brighter...because of their kindness and compassion. Not great big HUGE things, admittedly. Not actions that are going to SAVE THE WORLD. But actions that might...just MIGHT help save the life of ONE person and keep ONE child from going to bed hungry at night.

No, I CAN'T solve the awful, AWFUL tragedy of cancer. It's just too overwhelming...to demoralizing. But I CAN support RELAY FOR LIFE and it's life-long, life-sustaining efforts to find a cure for cancer and to support those who must live with it in the meantime. And while I may not be able to cure anyone from cancer or end this awful disease, I CAN pray, with every ounce and fiber of my being, for those who fall victim to it that GOD'S presence and GOD'S strength and GOD'S comfort and GOD'S hope and GOD'S love – and mine too – might give THEM the strength...the comfort...the hope and the love to get through WHATEVER their futures may hold.

And no, maybe I CAN'T go into all the world to make disciples of all people. But I CAN go into MY world. I CAN start right here AT HOME...in my own backyard...within my family and among my own neighbors and friends...inviting and encouraging them to come be a part of the wonderful Good News Gospel we share in this place as followers of Jesus. Which, when you think about it, is PRECISELY the way Jesus told his disciples to do it...to start going into all the world by going into their own backyards...in Jerusalem and Judea.

I think we would all be more HOPEFUL about our chances of DOING something for our Lord if we thought more candidly about what it is we really CAN do. Thirty-some years ago, the secretary in my previous church once taught me to "think small" about my calling as a pastor. Coming straight out of seminary and being new in my first church, I had GREAT AND GRAND ideas about all the wonderful sermons I was going to preach and the great teaching and counseling I was going to do and all the needy people I was going to help along the way. I was going to build the biggest and best church the little town of Carlisle had ever seen. I was going to bring in the Kingdom of God right there in that little corner of Southwest Ohio. I mean, I took myself SERIOUSLY...and I mean SERIOUSLY!

One day, the church secretary, Alice, knocked on my office door while I was deep in study for my Sunday sermon. That was back in the days when I was thrown into an absolute PANIC if I didn't have my sermon finished, polished and MEMORIZED by Thursday morning at the latest.

None of this Friday afternoon or Saturday evening stuff like I end up doing so often now days! Well, I was working furiously and I didn't really want to be disturbed. That was also back in the days when I used to keep my office door CLOSED to prevent just such interruptions.

So when Alice knocked and poked her head in the door, I immediately and very OBVIOUSLY stuck my index finger on the place in the book I was reading as if to say I didn't want to lose my place because of some "interruption" and answered "Uh Huh" without raising my eyes from the book. All of which served its purpose and gave Alice the very distinct impression that she was interrupting me. "Oh, I'm sorry!" she said. "I see you're busy! I'll talk to you later," she said as she sheepishly closed the door.

Well, I could tell that she was in some distress, but I also knew I simply HAD to get that sermon done. So I keep right on working...for fifteen or twenty minutes or so until my conscience got the better of me and my guilt convinced me I'd better go see what was going on in Alice's life.

So leaving my office and pulling up a chair at her desk, I said to Alice, "I'm really sorry about earlier! Will you give me another chance at being human and let me listen." She did. And I did. And for the next hour and a half I listened to her pain – a husband who was an alcoholic and having a nervous breakdown – again...a teenage son who was growing increasingly rebellious – drinking too much and staying out all night...and a biopsy report she had recently receive that looked none-too-promising. The woman was an emotional Tsunami and I hadn't even bothered to lift my eyes from the page I was reading when she knocked on my door...until, that is, God picked me up by the scruff of my neck and dragged me out of the safe retreat of my office to deal with this woman's pain. Oh, there wasn't a whale of a lot I actually DID for her that day. Mostly just listened. But instead of DISCOURAGING me that I couldn't solve all of her problems for her, the experience ENCOURAGED me to realize that there was something I COULD do...small as it was. I could LISTEN! I could listen and I could CARE!

Not too long after that, I came across a saying that has been burned into my brain ever since. "I used to think the interruptions kept me from my work...until I realized that the interruptions WERE my work!"

After my mother died during the summer of my first year in Seminary, I was going through a collection of some of the things she had written and collected from other writers that she found meaningful. And I among those writings I found something she had jotted down. I don't know if she wrote it or it came to her from someone else. But it was a prayer that I've always tried to remember, for it speaks to me of the blessedness of thinking small. It goes something like this:

Dear Lord, help me do great things with my life!

But if I can't do GREAT things, Lord, Help me to do SMALL things, in a GREAT way!

"Blessed are those who think small, for they shall be people of hope!"

This week, I want to encourage you to "think small." No, it's not an invitation to get caught up in the "me-ism" we are all born with...OR to wallow in a bunch of "small-mindedness." Lord knows there's enough of THAT around already! No, it is instead an encouragement to find yourself a little HOPE in the things you CAN do something about and the things you CAN deal with. It is a reminder that hope happens when you act...or speak...or pray in small ways –

When you're gracious and understanding and speak kindly to the cashier down at WalMart whose having a terrible day and has finally gotten to you after you've waited through a line of fifteen other people in front of you, ALL of whom it seems, felt it their purpose in life to give the cashier a piece of their mind for having to wait in line for so long...

When you take the time to let someone who's been waiting and waiting enter into the stream of traffic in the construction zone along South Main, but no one else will be gracious enough to take five seconds to let them turn.

When you spend an hour or two of your time to go out to Heartland...or Logan Acres...or Green Hills to visit with some of the residents there who, I can pretty much double-dog GUARANTEE you will be delighted...DELIGHTED to see you and have someone to talk to.

When you pray...simply PRAY...for those in our church family...for those in your OWN family...for those you don't even know, but God knows...who need a little comfort and strength and courage and hope and healing in their lives right now.

Not necessarily BIG things...but LITTLE things that make a BIG difference because they are so very important.

No doubt you've heard it before, but someone, somewhere summed it up in a phrase:

"Practice random acts of kindness and senseless deeds of mercy!"

Think about that a minute. Little words, tiny phrases, small kindnesses. *"Thank you so much!" "I'm sorry." "Oh, it's SO good to see you!" "I understand." "You did a GOOD JOB!" "I CARE about you." "I'm so PROUD of you!" "Please come back!" "Tell him we really MISSED him."*

And not only words, but little DEEDS as well. A smile. A pat on the back. A hug. An arm around the shoulder. Helping someone down the stairs. Helping carry a load. Taking time to listen. Giving a gift...a token...that says "I care!"

And the amazing thing is not what they do for the person to whom the words are spoken...for whom the deeds are done. The AMAZING thing is what they do for the person so SPEAKS those words...who DOES those deeds. They give HOPE. They let you know you CAN make a difference...even if only in a SMALL kind of way.

I'm thoroughly convinced, you see, that that is PRECISELY what Jesus meant when he said the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. When it is planted...when the kind word is spoken...when the small deed is done...it may well be the TINIEST of seeds. But after awhile it grows and becomes the BIGGEST of plants. It becomes so big that even the birds come and are blessed to be able to make their nests in its shade!

"Thank you SO MUCH for coming!" he said to me. *"You don't know how much I needed someone to talk to."* And all I did was listen.

So how about it? Would you give it a try during the coming week? THINK SMALL! Write one card of encouragement...that ream of letters you've been meaning to write can wait!

Visit someone who's alone or lonely. Just ONE someone! You can't see them all. But you'll never know what the time you spend with just one person will mean in their lives.

Pray for one person in our church family. That's why we put the prayer list in the bulletin each week and why each day of the week we highlight one member or one family within our church family to pray for. No, you can't pray for all 400+ of our members and friends every day. But you CAN pray for ONE!

Find a way to spend an hour or so doing something for someone else this week...feeding the hungry at Our Daily Bread...visiting a home-bound member...reading with a child at school...volunteering at Habitat for Humanity – something...ANYTHING that will get you out of yourself and into doing for others. Oh, it won't take a whale of a lot of your time or effort or energy. But I can pretty much guarantee you it will make a difference, not only in the life of the person you help...but in your OWN life as well. It will give you HOPE...hope to know you CAN make a difference by doing something even so small.

No, it's not one of the Beatitudes. And unfortunately, Jesus didn't say it...not in so many words, anyway. But I'd almost be willing to BET you he wouldn't mind a bit if we put the words in his mouth and included the saying in his teachings. If Jesus never SAID it, he certainly IMPLIED it:

"Blessed are those who think small, for they shall be people of hope!"

Amen...and AMEN!

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