

1

Buildings collapsing. Homelessness. Global warming. Political divisions. Gun violence. Sometimes when I read or hear about the various issues going on in the world, I feel overwhelmed, as though I have had little impact on making a difference in the big picture. Have you ever wondered what difference you make in the lives of those around you? Sometimes we may have great visions about what we can do, only to discover that when faced with reality, our expectations may not always match our ideals.

For example, when I reflect on my life and think about the eight congregations I have served over the past 35 year since I entered seminary, I wonder how many lives I've impacted. We often don't hear from those whose lives we've influenced, and we may be left wondering what we can do to make a difference.

I imagine Jesus and the disciples might have felt a similar way when they returned to Nazareth, Jesus' hometown. Before returning home, Jesus had selected 12 followers to teach so that he could send them out into the world to continue spreading his ideas about God's presence in the world. Jesus had healed those who were ill, had calmed a storm, and had taught crowds of followers. Now he returned to his home,

with his group of disciples, prepared to bring his hometown residents hope as well.

He first began teaching in the synagogue, where some worshipers may have watched him growing up as a child. While teaching, some listeners were amazed, while others began to murmur among themselves, "Where did Jesus get all this wisdom?"

Someone finally realized, "Hey, isn't this Jesus, the carpenter's son—Mary's boy? We've known him since he was a little kid. We know the rest of his family—his brothers and sisters—so who does Jesus think he is, coming into town and filing us with his lofty ideas?"

And then, we have this interesting commentary from the narrator, a statement I haven't paid much attention to until now: "And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them." Although I think healing people is quite amazing, the townspeople didn't seem to think much about it, with the summary of his visit indicating he didn't do much there. He did what he could, but it didn't seem like much. Now, if someone can sum up Jesus' action in such a nonchalant and casual way, and yet we know the amazing things Jesus did, maybe we shouldn't be so hard on ourselves, for

2

all of us make some impact as well, even if you don't see it at first.

Even a well-know author didn't think much of her own writing, for she said of her book published in 1960 that she "wasn't sure what to expect." And then she commented,

I was hoping for a quick and merciful death at the hands of the reviewers but, at the same time, I sort of hoped someone would like it enough to give me encouragement. Public encouragement,' she later said. 'I hoped for a little, as I said, but I got rather a whole lot, and in some ways this was just about as frightening as the quick, merciful death I'd expected. ¹

You may have heard of this author, Harper Lee, and read her book *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which describes the tense racial relations and injustice in our country. More than 30 million copies of her books have sold in 40 languages. She may not have thought much of her own writing, but she did what she could by writing a novel, which has impacted countless readers by telling a story about racism in our country.

What story do you have to tell? What might you say that could make a difference in someone's life? That's something rock singer Bon Jovi wondered as he released one verse and the chorus of the song "Do

What You Can" near the end of last year. The chorus stated:

When you can't do what you do
You do what you can
This ain't my prayer, it's just a thought I'm wanting to send
'Round here, we bend but don't break
Down here, we all understand
When you can't do what you do
You do what you can

Bon Jovi asked fans to send in their stories about how the pandemic has affected them. He took those ideas and created the rest of the song, and together they created a hopeful song about what we can do even when we don't think we can do anything.

President Theodore Roosevelt once quoted in his autobiography his friend Squire Bill Widener as saying, "Do what you can, with what you've got, where you are."² Roosevelt wrote that although it's attractive to become a businessperson or President or successful lawyer or doctor, it's the joy of having children that brings the most success. And then he wrote,

And as for a life deliberately devoted to pleasure as an end—why, the greatest happiness is the happiness that comes as a by-product of striving to do what must be done, even though sorrow is met in the doing.³

I imagine there have been many people throughout the history of our nation who have

3

wondered if they have made a difference, even those writers of Declaration of Independence. When signing it 245 years ago on July 4, they may have wondered what nation might develop after them, especially after so much struggle and sorrow. They probably never imagined our 4th of July celebrations hundreds of years later.

Sometimes we may run into those times of sorrow, when we wonder why we're doing what we do, whether our actions make a difference. After Jesus left his hometown without much success, he sent his disciples into nearby villages to offer healing to those in need. He knew their task wouldn't be easy, so he warned them, "If a place doesn't welcome you or listen to you, as you leave, shake the dust off your feet as a witness against them" (Mark 6:11, CEB). In other words, if someone doesn't accept the good that you're

trying to do, don't let their dirt get you stuck in the mud. Or, as *The Message* Bible translation says, "Don't make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way."

Jesus encouraged his followers to offer whatever hope they had, to shine whatever light they could, which is something one girl did as he stood

on a street corner...holding a mirror in her hand, reflecting the light of the sun toward a house and centering the bright spot on one of the windows.

"What are you doing?" asked a person who was passing by.

"My brother is sick in that house," said the little girl, "and since the sun never enters his room, I was trying to reflect a little of it in there with this mirror."⁴

May you reflect some of God's light this week and do what you can, trusting that you do make a difference in the world to those around you.

¹ Quoted material from Garrison Keillor, *The Writer's Almanac* for July 11, 2020. www.garrisonkeillor.com/radio/twa-the-writers-almanac-for-july-11-2020/.

² <https://suebrewton.com/tag/do-what-you-can-with-what-you-have-where-you-are/>

³ Chapter IX of Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography (1913).

⁴ Hodgkin, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations*

for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #524.