

"MAKING A DIFFERENCE: THINK BIG, START SMALL "

Sermon Series, #4: Great Texts, Core Truths

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Millard Fuller fielded questions after his heartfelt talk in Springfield, Illinois. I had dragged our youth group there despite their muttering and resisting. But now they leaned ahead into Fuller's message with rapt, undivided attention. "How many dollars must you have in hand before starting a new Habitat for Humanity home?" was the first question, from an older guy who headed the Trustees at his church.

"It is a great question," smiled Fuller. "Thanks for asking it. It would be foolhardy to begin a Habitat for Humanity home with less than one dollar. Someone needs to ante up that first dollar. It would be *reckless* to go ahead without it. Then again, if we expect bankrolls up front to pay for houses before building, where's the faith there? Pagans can do that. Faith is different. It creates something out of nothing."

The man slowly rephrased his query, as though Fuller didn't get it. He could not grasp building homes as outreach to the poor other than how he'd learned it in mortgage banking. It was like he was thinking, "These poor church people need a dose of reality on how finance gets done." Hearing now the economics of Jesus, he heard of a higher reality. *He* was getting transformed, not transforming others.

That was 32 years ago. Habitat for Humanity was a fledgling movement then. Did you know in 1976 it took them a full year to build just one house? Like any movement, they proceeded in fits and starts. But even from Habitat's first days, they boldly announced they would eliminate poverty housing in the world. They still believe they will do it. Since then, they've built 800,000 homes worldwide housing 4 million people. Habitat is among the top ten builders of new homes in the US.

Let's back up and see where we are headed today. One of the most basic tenets of following Christ is that God put us on this world not only to fully enjoy our days. God has also put us on this earth to make a difference. To be a disciple of Christ means casting our lot with the infirmed, the naked, the persecuted, the homeless, the broken, the fragile, the grieving, and the starving. Gathered together in the church, we can make a greater difference than we ever could isolated and alone.

But how we go about this is all-important. The motives we bring and how we proceed are as important as the results we seek. For example, we don't apologize for God's strong mandate to care. This impulse to go beyond ourselves is foundational, not optional. And it is non-negotiable. We don't stop talking and acting in this sphere because it upsets affluent and insulated worlds to hear about the broken and hurting. People in deep need are not interrupting our well-groomed lives. In Jesus' way of seeing things, they are a gift from God. And we don't get embarrassed inviting generous financial support from others. After all, we aren't asking for ourselves. Embarrassment is finally meeting God having done nothing.

My point today about making a difference for Christ's cause is this: we *think big*, in visions as great as the redemption of all humankind, with not one broken person disposable, not one soul left behind. It's like how consultants, to inspire, will use the concept of B.H.A.G, a big hairy audacious goal. But we *start small*, trusting God to take our meager efforts, and miraculously multiply them into scenarios beyond our imagining. Jesus said even a cool cup of water given to the thirsty isn't lost on God. It's something great. Great movements have begun out of less.

I began with the example of Fuller and Habitat because it is such a dramatic example of the bold and humble willingness to think big and start small. And do you know what else? Making a difference this way is counterintuitive to being human. Unless we have money and influence, unless we have all of the powers that be backing us, we imagine it well-nigh impossible to make a difference. We want to start big after thinking, praying, studying, and conversing too little. Then after our passion flames out and our efforts fail, we end up bitter and hardened, mouthing lies like, "Those people don't really want any help. Their lives will never change."

Here's an example. Anybody remember the war on poverty back in the Sixties? It was a noble effort, embodying our best instincts. But it ended badly. Because it ended so badly, too many have concluded that poverty can never change. But the big reason the Great Society initiatives failed was because they didn't think it through and they were unwilling to start small. After all, Congress and tax dollars would save the world. Attacking urban poverty, for example, a full-tiered staff was hired from executives to secretaries. Office space was leased, fully-equipped with a full array of office machinery. All of this before the vision clarified and refined. There they were, all dressed up with no place to go, all of the budget going to infrastructure with nothing left over to execute the mission. No one completely grasped the entire mission and how the particulars worked along the way.

To make a difference as Christ's followers, we are willing to think big and start small. Why think big? Because at Easter God has already won the age-old war against evil, darkness, and death. We work backward from the Easter event. We carry this victorious news into the trenches of need at the front lines of struggle.

But why start small? That has to do with how God confers blessing. Today we heard Jesus say if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we can move mountains. Jesus also said (Luke 16.10) that those faithful in small things will also be found faithful in great things. The one precedes the other. So God expects us to serve humbly and wait patiently before blessing us upon grander horizons with results or outward recognition. As we scan the gospels, almost never do we see dramatic miracles in turn occasioning great faith. No, instead we see small acts of faith occasioning the greatest miracles. God wants us to think big, start small.

When I was a part-time parish associate at the First Congregational Church of Branford, Connecticut during my divinity school days, I came in late to a big idea that had found a small beginning. Senior Minister Roger Manners and the lay

leadership of that local church had gotten wind across the Big Pond of a movement in Great Britain. It was called *hospice*. Hospice did everything within their power to ensure that the dying among us should have afforded to them the same comforts, dignity and consideration that we have today come to take for granted.

With pediatricians and a chaplain from Yale, some Congregational churches around New Haven gained a foothold stateside for the quiet, heartfelt, irreplaceable ministries of hospice. The first hospice chapter was founded in Branford. They quietly went about their healing work with the dying. And it was out of this epicenter that the death with dignity movement spread across the United States.

Ponder that for a moment. A few had the nerve to dream that such a vital ministry of mercy as hospice might come here. As a result, all that we know about caring for human life in its latter, vulnerable stages has changed for the better.

I want you to remember four words today. Think big; start small. Brian McLaren calls it global/local vision. I prefer think big; start small. Has anyone ever heard of the 19th century architect Daniel Burnham? He designed the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, the Flatiron Building in New York and Union Station in DC. "Make no little plans," he wrote. "They have no magic to stir humanity's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans. Aim high in your hope and work. Remember, our sons and daughters are going to do things that will stagger us. Let your watchword be order and your beacon, beauty. So think big."

But I also like how Emily Dickinson said, "Truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind." People do not easily accommodate massive change. Start small. As a bringer of social change, Mother Theresa was at once realistic and visionary when she said, "It's not given us to do great things, but only small things greatly."

As you go into your week, ask yourself, is it possible to make a difference in lives you had long ago written off? If you made modest efforts with the broken, would God bless your offerings in ways far beyond your imagining? Do you have faith enough to trust that the greatest movements of grace and mercy spring from the humblest beginnings? And the initiator could be you and the time could be now?

From small mustard seeds of faith, we trust God to make a godly way where no way exists. Pulling in the same direction, the many of us in the church draw on the power of God's love, stronger than death. Think big. Start small. This simple formula is key to maintain both the expansiveness and the humility of our faith. Friends, God's goal is not only to bless the church. God bigger goal is to bless the whole world through the church. We all have our role and part in that. Amen.