



Little Things Make a Big Difference



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
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<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016-12-04-AWW.mp3>.

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Luke 23:33-43

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The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

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*Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him,
and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him
in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

(Matthew 3:5-6)

Of all the characters in the Bible, John the Baptist is definitely one of the most colorful, because he always comes across a bit crazy. There he is living way out in the middle of nowhere, miles and miles from anything, where all he could eat is locusts and honey. He wears these strange clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. His hair and beard are long and straggly, looking like they haven't been washed in months, and his eyes burn with intensity, while his voice thunders with judgment. John the Baptist is like someone we might see on a street corner of a big city, thumping a Bible and telling us we're going straight to hell if we don't repent. He is the kind of guy who would make us anxious and uncomfortable, so much so we would do anything to avoid him. We would cross the street in the middle of the block, just so we wouldn't have to walk past him.

Yet, at the time, the people of Jerusalem and all of Judea flocked to see John. While we would avoid him at all costs, they walked for hours and hours to find him, walking way out into the wilderness, leaving behind their homes, their villages, and so it would be easy for us to think the people of Israel were crazy – what were they doing? But, they weren't crazy. The people of Israel went out to see John because despite his appearance – the clothes, the behavior, the fire and brimstone – despite all of that, John offered the people something important, something they needed. He offered them hope, and a new possibility, a way to change their lives, and a way to make life better.

We have to remember the people of Israel lived in a turbulent and uncertain time. For most of their history, the people of Israel were divided, by their different tribes, by the North and South, and because they lived in a strategically important place along the Mediterranean, they were constantly under attack, from the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Greeks, the Romans. They were dominated by outsiders, who came in and subjugated the people and drained the economy. It was hard for any of the Israelites to get ahead, except for the very few who cut a deal with the political power. Most of the ordinary, regular people, people like you and me, suffered. They were angry and afraid. Their lives were in turmoil. They knew

that change was needed, but nobody knew how to bring about the change. They were disillusioned. It was a difficult and challenging time for the people of Israel.

I think we can all appreciate what that feels like, what the people of Israel were experiencing. If recent events have taught us anything, it might be that we have a lot in common with our biblical ancestors, maybe more than we thought. The last few weeks and months have been a difficult and emotional time. As we all know, our country is deeply divided, in so many different ways it is almost impossible to understand. Just turn on the television and watch the news – you’ll see the commentators can’t agree on anything. All they do is interrupt each other and yell at each other. That kind of behavior is contagious - it seems to be going around. Just log onto Facebook and you will see your family and friends acting the same way, saying hurtful things, spiteful things. And, it is painful to watch.

In times like these, when the issues before us seem daunting, we often struggle with how to react – the challenges seem too great, the problems too complicated. Sometimes, this leads to cynicism and despair. Feeling there is nothing we can do, we’ll just sit back and complain about how bad things are, and wallow in self-pity. Other times, we have the need to rise up and respond, but we won’t know where to begin, we don’t know how to move forward. Like the people of Israel, we know change is needed, but we don’t know how to make the change. It feels like that is where we are right now. We don’t know what to do, and yet, we have this need, this compulsion, to do something. Over the last few weeks, the question I have been asked the most is: What can we do? What can we do to make things better?

It’s a big question, and we all know there are no simple, clear answers to big questions. But, this morning, I want to propose one possible solution, one possible answer to that big question, and it’s to focus on the little things, because the little things can make a huge difference.

A few weeks ago, I was taking the train to NYC. I was happily ensconced in my seat, enjoying a brief nap, when the train pulled into a station and a family of four got on. The parents and two small boys started walking up the aisle, their luggage banging back and forth, the boys talking loudly as young boys do, making all sorts of noise, and I was sitting in the quiet car.

If you have never been in the quiet car, it’s important to understand how protective people are of their quiet. The quiet car is supposed to be like the library, with hushed voices and no using of cell phones. If someone violates these rules, if someone is making too much noise, someone else will almost certainly shout out, “This is the quiet car!”

So, here comes this family, not being very quiet, and you can tell people are getting annoyed. The family was right near me, trying to figure where they were all going to sit, when a woman across the aisle said, “Would you please sit down and stop making so much noise?!”

Except, they couldn't sit down, at least not all together, unless someone was willing to give up a seat. I'd like to tell you that I jumped up immediately, but the truth is I don't like to switch seats. Once I get comfortable, and I am in my space, with my stuff all spread out, I don't really like movin', and yet, I felt for this family because I have been that family. "Here," I said to the father, "you take this seat, and I'll sit up there."

And, you would have thought I gave the man a million dollars. For a moment, I thought he was gonna hug me, or even start crying.

Little gestures like that may not seem like much, especially in the face of the world's problems, and yet, as people of faith, we put our hope in little things. The Bible tells us a little stone can slay giant problems; a little faith can move mountains; a little child will save the world.

John the Baptist had this little idea of dunking people in water. He asked them to stand out in the river. He'd count, "1, 2, 3 go," and push them under, and they'd emerge with new hope and a new outlook and new life.

Little things can have big ramifications because God can take the little moments, the little actions, the little words and turn them into something extraordinary. We don't have to change the world. All we have to do is be faithful in those little things, those little moments that God puts in front of us, and God will take care of the rest.

So, over the next few weeks, if you are looking for something to do, if you want to make the world just a little bit better, do something little:

Greet someone with a smile.

Help someone who is lost.

Listen more and interrupt less.

Say "I'm sorry." Say "I love you."

Post something positive on Facebook.

And, give up your seat.

It doesn't take much to do enormous good. There is always someone who needs help, someone who needs a friend, someone who needs you and me to share a little bit of God's grace, and in that moment, all we have to do is show a little compassion, a little caring, a little graciousness, and who knows what can happen. Little gestures like that can make the world better, and that's all we have to do – just try to make the world better, because it is God who will save the world. God is sending His son to us, and he will save us. We can make the world a better place, each of us in our own little way, but only God can save it. And, save it God will.

Amen.