

Why bother with small things?

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In my work, I get to have conversations with college students about vocation and calling. One of the things I suggest to them is that all Christians have the same calling and vocation—to love God and to love our neighbor. We talk quite a bit about how small actions matter. God can use small actions for good. And we may not know what the effects of our action were.

Sometimes churches and parachurches and denominations emphasize size and numbers. We want to do a Big Thing for God. And that's okay. It's not that God doesn't like big things. God has done plenty of big things.

But what if our church doesn't do a big thing? What if all we do is to help with a summer church school, or plant a garden, or rake leaves for homebound folks, or build part of one house?

What if I don't do a big thing? What if all I do is take one meal to someone, say hello to people I pass on the street, smile and encourage a mother whose children could be better behaved in the store?

Do these little things matter?

All these things might make me feel better. In fact I know they make me feel better. But do they actually do any good beyond that? And shouldn't I feel a little guilty about feeling good about what I do? Sometimes, when I don't feel like doing something—a "good deed"—I'll tell myself to do it because I know I will feel better afterwards. Seems a little self serving to me.

On the other hand, maybe my own reaction is all I can truly know. I can have an idea, a hunch that I was helpful to another. A person can tell me I was helpful to them. But did I do something significant? Did I make a lasting difference? Who knows? Honestly I only know my own heart, what happens to me, and I can have plenty of difficulty doing that.

If my heart becomes a little more open, a little more sympathetic, slightly more compassionate, somewhat more aware, incrementally more Christlike—that is perhaps all I can reasonably hope for.

As far as I can tell, big things are not God's primary way of being in the world.

God chooses to work with Abraham, one guy, and his family out of all the people in the world. God chooses Israel—one nation, and a little one at that—out of all the nations in the world. God becomes human as Jesus, one poor Jewish guy. Jesus talks about giving the thirsty a cup of water. Jesus tells parables about the kingdom of God using the images of a mustard seed and leaven. Jesus tells parables about searching for the one pearl and the one lost sheep. After the resurrection, the followers of Jesus are a small number of men and women who are mostly confused and frightened.

It seems to be the doing that matters, not the size. Faithfulness isn't about numbers. Smallness doesn't seem to be a problem for God. I wonder why it is a problem for us?

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