

“How To Make A Difference In The World”

Matthew 28:18-20

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I don't know if it would be at the top of the list, but it would rank very high. When I speak to college students and ask them what they want to hear, one request I usually get is, “How can I make a difference in my world?”

That says, first of all, something very good about young people. They want to make a difference in the world. They want to have a positive impact upon their culture and they are. Anyone who works with young people knows that today's youth are conscientious and courageous. I love being around them and learn so much from them.

Secondly, this request tells me that this goal is overwhelming given the size and complexity of our world. As a result, young people need to know where to begin and what to do. Today, on this Sunday when our college students are leading us in worship, I would like to address the question, **“How can I make a difference in my world?”**

I use as my scriptural basis for this sermon the final words of Jesus in Matthew, known as the Great Commission. I do so not because I am going to analyze these verses. I have done that and will again. However, I turn to the Great Commission because the message that permeates it is one of influence. To me, Jesus told his disciples to go and make a difference in the world, a positive difference. He challenged them to use their time, talents and resources to impact people's lives, specifically connecting them to God, the very source of life.

Their challenge is our challenge, too. Jesus wants us to make a difference in the world, whatever our age or circumstance in life. Let me suggest how we can do that.

First of all, take an inventory of your talents, skills, abilities, spiritual gifts and interests. What do you have to offer and who would benefit? What excites you? What brings a smile to your face when you think about doing it? What do others say you do well? What difference have you already made in people's lives?

It is so important that you be realistic and honest at this point. Parker Palmer writes in his book, Let Your Life Speak, “that it is possible to live a life other than your own.” You can live your life trying to fulfill others' expectations of you. As a result, you live from the outside, not the inside. You listen to everyone except your own heart.

Palmer continues, “The word vocation comes from a Latin word that means, voice. A vocation is not a goal I pursue but a calling I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.” Identity is the foundation and beginning of direction.

Secondly, take an inventory of your pain. The pain you are experiencing from a crisis or tragedy can be used to help others going through a similar ordeal. Reach out to those traveling down the road you have been. Offer them comfort, encouragement and advice. Share with them how you survived and what they must do to overcome their dilemma. What a difference this will make in their lives and yours.

I suppose every support group I know anything about began as a result of someone in pain reaching out to others who were hurting. This is ministry at its best and is a powerful ingredient in healing.

Let me take this a step further, though. If possible and appropriate, use what happened to you that caused your pain to reform society or prevent it from happening to another. This will not take your pain away but will make the world a better place. I have to believe that will make a difference in your life, too.

On July 27, 1981, John and Reve Walsh's life was shattered beyond comprehension. Their six year old son, Adam, was abducted and later found murdered. Their tragedy was

dramatized in the 1983 television movie, “Adam” and in the 1986 sequel, “Adam:His Song Continues.”

It wasn’t long after Adam’s death that the Walshes turned their grief into positive energy to help parents of missing and exploited children. Their tireless work led to the passage of the Missing Children Act of 1982 and the Missing Children Assistance Act of 1984. The latter Bill founded the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children which maintains a toll-free hotline number to report a missing child or a sighting of one. They founded the Adam Walsh Child Resource Center, a non-profit organization dedicated to legislative reform. Since 1996, Walsh has hosted the NBC Prime Time show, “America’s Most Wanted: America Fights Back.”

Turning grief into positive energy is one way to make a difference in the world. I know it is not easy, but John Walsh would be the first to tell you it is possible and beneficial.

Thirdly, look around to discover unmet needs. All of us come into contact with dozens if not hundreds of people every week. What have you noticed that these people need? What will go missing in their lives if you ignore them like many others do? Allow God to speak to you through newspaper and magazine articles, church newsletters and Internet sites about how people are hurting and the difference one person could make. Take seriously every request for help from whatever source to see if you have the skills to make a difference.

Don’t let the enormous number of needs paralyze you. Frederick Buechner encourages people to discover “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep needs.” The world needs everything but you cannot do everything. What needs are you to meet? Do the things you are gifted to do, have a passion for, the time to give and trust others to do their part.

Decide you are willing to pay the price. Change always comes with a price and being a change agent will require giving energy, effort and resources. As a matter of fact, the greater the difference you want to make, the higher price you will pay. Ask Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Mahatma Ghandi, Mikel Gorbechev, Neil Armstrong, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Todd Beamer.

Ask for God’s help. Remember the Pendulum Principle, “Every encounter with man must be balanced by an encounter with God.” God knows how much we need His help and is accessible. He will gladly help you overcome feelings of inferiority and fear and give you wisdom, courage and confidence.

On almost all his manuscripts, Johann Sebastian Bach placed two sets of initials. At the beginning he wrote, “J.J.” This stood for “Jesu juvet” translated “Jesus help me.” At the end he placed the initials, “S.D.G.” These letters stood for “Soli deo gloria,” meaning “to God alone be the glory.”

Don’t hesitate to ask for God’s help. Like any good parent, He is ready and willing to assist you.

Be patient. Some change comes quickly. Most does not. Give people time to think about what you are recommending and see the difference in you. Role modeling takes time for you to exhibit and others to notice.

Orthodontist William Gurley wrote, “I can hit a tooth with my fist, even two hundred times a day, and I’ll make it sore but I can’t move it. However, if I lay a feather on that tooth and leave it there, I can move it. The secret to moving a tooth is not the amount of pressure but the constancy of it.” Good advice!

As my friend, Dr. Alan Walworth wrote, “It strikes me that if one would be an influence to help move another, even toward a position which is best for him or her, the way of gentle consistency is best. It is certainly more effective than occasional frontal assaults, don’t you think?”

At the same time, you need to be determined and tenacious. All change agents face obstacles and discouragement. Persevere. Do not give up. Remember, love is not measured by what you start but by what you finish. Finish your course. Fulfill your mission.

Lou Gehrig played for the New York Yankees for fourteen seasons, suiting up 2,130 times without missing a game. In spite of colds, fevers, lumbago and broken bones, Gehrig was ready to go when the umpire yelled, "Play ball!" Late in his career, Gehrig had his hands x-rayed and found there were seventeen different fractures that had occurred over the course of his career. He had broken every finger on both hands in addition to sustaining other injuries. But every day he was ready to play, not because it was easy, but because he wouldn't quit. That's the kind of tenacity we need if we are going to make a difference in our world.

Be creative. Use your imagination. Say it differently. Write it differently. Do it differently. Think outside the box.

Do you recall the movie, "Dead Poets Society" directed by Peter Weir? Robin Williams brilliantly played the role of Professor John Keating at a preparatory school for boys. Mr. Keating was not like other teachers at Welton Academy. He was a man before his time. His teaching methods were new and controversial for 1959 as he taught the boys in unconventional ways to think for themselves.

On his first day at the Academy, Mr. Keating grabbed the students' attention when he ushered them into the hall and whispered "carpe diem" while standing around the case containing the pictures of former professors and class members, most of whom were dead. He made it appear as if the people in these pictures were talking to the boys and challenging them to "seize the day." "One day," Mr. Keating said, "you, too, will be fodder for worms. Make your life count before that time comes."

That's the kind of creativity that will be required of anyone who wants to change the world.

Be willing to take risks. Do not let the fear of failure cause you to be timid or paralyze you. Do not require a roadmap or a blueprint that shows every step of the journey. Gather information. Make decisions. Have faith. Be flexible.

Remember what Jesus said to his disciples after challenging them to go into the world to make a difference? "And surely I am with you always, even unto the end of the age" Matthew 28:20. We do not go alone. The early disciples did not and neither do we. That's why we can take risks, as a matter of fact, risk it all if necessary.

I recall the advice of my friend, former Senator John Sherman Cooper, who told me, "Bob, when it is all said and done, we will be asked two questions. What did you do to make the world better? What could you have done that you didn't?" In a way, those questions have haunted me since he spoke them. I am working on my answers every day. I hope you are, too.