

Changing the World – One Person at a Time

1st Peter 4: 8-11; James 1:22-25

CWZepp, BWCOB, February 2007

A woman's daughter kept calling her to tell her the same thing: "You *must* come and see the daffodils before they are over."

Now it wasn't that she did not want to go. But it was a two hour drive from her house to her daughter's. And while she didn't consider herself old (at least not old, old) she didn't particularly like driving, especially since it seemed to her that everyone was in a hurry these days. But her daughter persisted, and finally she agreed to come next Tuesday.

Next Tuesday arrived, and it was cold and rainy. But she had promised to go, and so she got in her car and made the drive over to her daughter's. When she arrived, and had made her way through the plastic toys strewn around the front yard, and had hugged her grandchildren who had come running out to meet her, she said to her daughter, almost with relief, "Forget the daffodils! The road is almost invisible in the clouds and fog, and besides, there is nothing in the world that I would rather see than you and these children."

Her daughter smiled calmly, and said, "We drive in this kind of weather all the time. And trust me, you will never forgive yourself if you miss this experience."

The woman tried to argue, but 20 minutes later, she was sitting in the passenger seat of her daughter's car as they pulled onto a small gravel road leading to a tiny country church. On the far side of the church was a hand-lettered sign that read, "Daffodil Garden." They got out of the car, each took a child's hand, and the woman followed her daughter down the path leading around the church.

When they rounded the corner of the church, the woman looked up and gasped. Before her lay a glorious sight. It looked as though someone had taken a great vat of gold and poured it down over the mountain peak and its slopes. The flowers were planted in majestic, swirling patterns – great ribbons and swaths of deep orange, white, lemon yellow, salmon pink, saffron, and butter yellow. Each different-colored variety was planted as a group so that it swirled and flowed like its own river with its own unique hue. There were five acres of flowers.

But she had yet to discover the truly amazing thing about this garden. Her daughter asked her, "Can you guess who did this?" The woman shook her head. "Just one woman. She lives up there," her daughter said, pointing to a well-kept A-frame house nestled in the midst of the garden.

They continued along the path, which eventually led them to the house. On the patio, there was a poster with the headline: "Answers to Questions I Know You Are Asking."

Line by line, they indeed found answers to the questions they had been wondering. The first: "50,000 bulbs". The second: "One at a time, by one woman. Two hands, two feet, and very little brain." The third: "Began in 1958." The woman looked at her daughter and simply smiled. She knew why she had insisted that she come to that place. She needed to be reminded that one woman can change the world.

This past summer, I was privileged to attend my fourth consecutive National Youth Conference. And while the official theme was "Come and See", it could have just as easily been "Change the World." Speaker after speaker encouraged youth and their advisors to commit themselves to following Jesus with a faith that could move the mountainous problems of our world – poverty, child exploitation, hunger, violence. One of the speakers who generated the most response was Craig Kielberger, the still very young man who had founded the Free the Children foundation with his classmates 11 years ago at the age of 12, when he had been touched by a story he read in the newspaper about a boy in Pakistan who had been murdered when he began to speak out against child labor in his country. Today, Free the Children has over one million children and youth involved in educational and development programs in 45 countries, and it is the largest network of children helping children in the world. Craig's challenge to those of us at NYC was not to wait to get to work for God, and his example proved that committed and motivated young people can make a profound and lasting difference in the lives of those in need. Indeed, he was a living witness that a 12 year old boy can change the world.

One day, while walking along a beach, a man saw in the distance what looked like a young boy dancing. It warmed his heart to see someone so young and so free in their outward expression dancing to the new day on the beach, and he began walking toward the boy. As he got closer, he realized that the young man was actually running, leaning down, picking something up, and then gently throwing it far into the ocean. As he came still closer, he saw thousands of starfish the tide had thrown onto the beach. Unable to return to the ocean during low tide, they were dying. Then he realized that this boy was picking up the starfish one by one and throwing them back out into the ocean.

Watching the futile effort to save the starfish, the man approached the boy. "There must be thousands of starfish on this beach," he said to him. "There is no possible way that you can get to all of them. There are just too many. It doesn't matter what you do, you won't be able to save them."

The boy laughed as he continued to pick up another starfish and toss it back into the ocean. "It mattered to that one," he said.

The man thought for a moment, shook his head, and smiled. "Little fella really thinks he can change the world," he thought to himself.

PJ was only 5 years old when he was diagnosed with leukemia. Soon thereafter, he began to receive a series of cheery notes and cards, little gifts and goodies to brighten his spirits. Each was adorned with a large green bow. These presents all came from an anonymous friend who signed each card simply, "Magic Dragon." One of PJ's favorite gifts was a large green plus toy dragon, which quickly became the embodiment of the gift-giver and PJ's constant companion.

As PJ grew sicker, "Magic Dragon's" attention never waned; notes of encouragement and support arrived continuously. The treasured toy dragon accompanied PJ to the hospital, sympathetically sporting the same bandages and sharing all the painful, unpleasant treatments with this little boy. Tragically, despite all efforts, PJ lost his battle with leukemia. At his funeral, there was a large bouquet with a huge spread of daisies, all tied up with an enormous green bow – Magic Dragon's final gift.

No one ever discovered Magic Dragon's identity. After some initial inquiries, PJ's parents realized that it was most appropriate to honor Magic Dragon's anonymity, allowing whoever it was the joy of secret service and love without concern for self. For one little dying boy with leukemia, the world was changed by a Magic Dragon.

In 1939, a young Indiana farmer by the name of Dan West was volunteering as a relief worker during the Spanish Civil War, handing out cups of powdered milk to orphans and refugees on both sides of the conflict. Frustrated by the need to allocate a very limited supply of food aid to these people in need, he had an idea – to give suffering families cows so that they could produce their own milk and not have to rely on temporary aid. By 1944, he had returned to the US and organized "Heifers for Relief." He got his neighbors to donate the first cows, and before long, thousands of cows were distributed throughout Europe following World War II.

Today, West's idea lives on in the work of Heifer International, which now sends not only cows to families in need, but 25 different types of animals, including everything from sheep and goats, rabbits and ducks, to llamas and water buffalo. Its mission is to end hunger and poverty and to care for the earth through livestock development and training in agricultural practices that protect and improve rather than deplete the environment. Furthermore, each family Heifer assists agrees to provide offspring of their animals to other families in need, multiplying the impact of every income-producing animal donated by Heifer, with the hope that entire communities would be able to lift themselves out of poverty. Through gifts that keep on giving, Heifer is changing the world.

Just six years ago, Catherine Ryan Hyde published a fictional book called *Pay It Forward*. In it, a teacher gives his class a voluntary, extra-credit assignment to think of an idea that could change the world, and put it into action. One of his students comes up with the idea which gives the book its name. He would do something good for three people, and then when they ask how they can pay him back, he would tell them each to "pay it forward" by doing something good for three other people. That way, nine more

people would be helped. As each good deed elicits more good deeds, the number of people who are touched increases exponentially.

This fictional story, which has also been made into a movie, has inspired a real life movement by the same name. The Pay it Forward Foundation now works to educate and inspire students to realize that they can change the world, by helping one person at a time and inviting them to pay it forward.

Today we are celebrating the ministry of service. And these stories, I believe, embody the spirit of service to which our faith calls us. For at its heart, the call to serve is a call to love, and a call to act on that love. Sometimes we get the idea that service is something for which we sign up, for which we designate a time, and for which we leave our normal pursuits for a brief time in volunteer work. We associate service with mission projects and workcamps, volunteer hours and non-profit organizations. And these all have a very good and a very valuable place in our ministry of service.

But the call to serve is more than any of these. It is a call to a way of life, a way of being. It is a call to a self-emptying, self-giving love. The writer of 1st Peter, in the passage we read this morning, says that everyone should serve with whatever gift they have received, and that we should serve with the very strength of God.

Now if we take that message to heart – if we take it into our being and allow it to lay a claim on our lives that leads us to action – then we can and we will and we do change the world. It happens one person at a time, when one person really believes that they are serving with the very strength of God, whether they are planting flowers or working to eliminate hunger, saving starfish or providing gifts to lift whole families and communities out of poverty.

We need not do great things when we serve. In fact, Mother Teresa once said “we can do no great things; only small things with great love.” But as it has been written, “We must recognize the power of individuals to change the world, to make a difference in communities, and to impact lives....The more people open themselves to these opportunities and follow God’s call to act, the more the small things become great as they reflect God’s great love.”

As we celebrate and recognize our service this day, may we recommit ourselves to accept the call to service – to serve with whatever gift we have received – and to do all things with great love. And in so doing, may we change the world for the better – one person at a time. Amen