Book 37

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ORDINARY PEOPLE Acts 1:6-14

Some of the most amazing changes for the good in this world have come about and continue to occur because of the faithfulness of ordinary people. The existence and ministry of the Christian church through history and throughout the world is one good example.

In the Book of Acts we read that following his death and resurrection, Jesus turned over the movement he had started to a group of ordinary people. He said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) A few verses later, Luke who wrote the Book of Acts, tells us

some of the names of the ordinary people to whom Jesus entrusted this task, "Peter and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James, along with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers."

Imbedded in this story are several important principles as to how God works in the world through ordinary people and how we are to work with each other.

The first principle is this: God often works through ordinary people who never make the headlines but who are as important as those

who do. Most of the individuals Luke mentions only by their first names have been long forgotten but it is because of their supportive roles and their faithfulness that God's work continues.

I was reminded of the importance of supportive roles when I attended a concert. The featured soloist was a soprano, twenty-seven years old. She had a remarkable talent for her age. She was outstanding, but it was her accompanist who captured my imagination and admiration.

She was an unassuming young woman, but highly talented. She had mastered the skill of being the unobtrusive servant of another's art. She was sensitive to the singer's phrasing,

accent, timing--always watching the face, listening to the breathing.

It was her supportive role that helped make the evening a delight. She accepted the fact that as an accompanist she would succeed to the degree that she was forgotten.

But she did not go unnoticed. The singer invited the accompanist on stage with her for curtain calls, and then stepping aside, she pointed to her in gratitude. The generous applause that followed gave evidence that the audience was not unaware of the important role she played.

It is reassuring to know that a person does not

have to be a star to make a significant contribution. Giving the support that enables another to succeed is one of the finest expressions of humility, love and unselfishness.

One of my old professors at Yale Divinity School, Dr. Halford Luccock, tells of a college commencement in which a young man graduated with high honors. There was in the audience a great musician--his mother. For years she had rendered notable music on two remarkable instruments, a typewriter and a washboard--the melodious accompaniment which made his education possible.

A researcher who made a study of National Merit Scholarship winners discovered that

behind every one of those high-school young people there was an individual, a mother, father, teacher, coach, pastor, scoutmaster, Camp Fire leader, someone who really cared, who continually encouraged excellence, never letting a student be satisfied with mediocrity.

Robert Brookfield, an actor was once mistakenly reported to be dead. He had the rare experience of seeing his own obituary. It read: "Never a great actor, he was invaluable in supporting roles." Though he might not have considered that a compliment, nothing finer could be said of anyone-- invaluable in supporting roles. That was certainly true of those early followers of Jesus to whom he entrusted the future of his ministry.

"We can't all be heroes," said Will Rogers, "because somebody has to sit on the curb and clap as they go by."

Joe Montana, was a great football quarterback. All sports- minded Americans know his name but there are relatively few who could list the names of one or more of the offensive linemen who protected Montana, making it possible for him to throw a record number of touchdown passes in Super Bowl 24. It is to the credit of Montana that he continually spoke of his teammates when commendation was directed his way.

Great scientists have been quick to acknowledge their indebtedness to others.

Jonas Salk said the work he was able to do depended on the research of hundreds of men and women whose names remain unknown, but whose labors made possible the polio vaccine. Sir Isaac Newton said, "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

The Christian faith at its best has been spread around the world because of the supportive roles of countless people whose names never made the headlines. In the modern missionary movement, the name David Livingstone is widely known, but only a few people have ever heard of David Hogg. He was the Sunday School teacher in Scotland who instilled in Livingstone the sense of self-worth and desire to serve that encouraged him to serve the

needs of thousands in Africa.

Our superstar culture is unfair and destructive to the spirit of many people in the arbitrary way it reserves affirmation only for the exceptionally beautiful, the unusually brilliant, or outstandingly competent. Skill and brilliance do not mean an individual contributes beneficially to the world, nor does an average endowment mean a mediocre performance. The early followers of Jesus were men and women of ordinary endowments, but extraordinary commitment and power.

Most of us will never be famous or widely known, but it is heartening to know that no one is useless who encourages and enables others

to realize their best. This congregation is what it is today because of countless people who have supported it through the years and their names are largely unknown.

This leads us to another principle which is imbedded in this story of Jesus turning over his ministry to a group of ordinary people. And that second principle is that we are members of one another and we need one another. He did not entrust his ministry to an individual but to a group.

Some years ago a telephone operator in a small Cape Cod town received a daily call from a man who asked the exact time. This went or for many weeks. Finally the operator asked t

man why he called every day requesting the right time. "Because," he said, "I am the man responsible for blowing the whistle at noon each day." "That's strange," the operator replied, "because every day, exactly at noon, I set my clock by your whistle."

A simple story, but an accurate parable of life. We are dependent on one another, and each life has far more far- reaching effect on others than is often ever realized. The early leaders of the church knew this because the Book of Acts reports, "All these were constantly together devoting themselves to prayer."

A third principle embedded in this story of Jesus turning over his ministry to a group of

ordinary people is that in a world of great diversity, there is one thing we all have in common. Each one of these early disciples had a handicap of one kind or another. The Apostle Paul had his "thorn in the flesh," as he called it. Peter has his temper and impulsiveness. We do not know the specific handicap of each of those men and women but you can be sure each one had one. No one of them was perfect.

Each one of us has a handicap of one kind or another. For some it is physical, mental or emotional infirmity; others suffer estrangements within the family circle; and there are others who struggle through a lifetime with feelings of inferiority or timidity.

One has this handicap and one that. The race of life is run in fetters. We are inspired and heartened by those who deal with this human predicament in creative and courageous ways, turning a minus into a plus and a disadvantage into advantage.

The story of history is the story of those who refused to use handicap as an excuse for not contributing something worthwhile to life. They did not merely tie a knot in the end of the rope and hang on, but became masters rather than victims of circumstance.

Around us today there are family members and friends who bear their own burdens, handicaps and infirmities without dramatizing them to

others. They are the courageous souls who lift our lives by theirs.

Dean Briggs of Harvard had such people in mind when he responded to a freshman student who came to his office to explain his tardiness in submitting an assignment. "I'm sorry," said the student, "but I was not feeling very well."

"Young man," replied Dean Briggs, "please bear in mind that the greater part of the world's work is carried on by people who aren't feeling very well."

What's the secret of dealing with our handicaps? We need first to know what they are. Then we can sometimes develop a skill to

compensate or we can eliminate some of the impediments that handicap us. Many handicaps can be minimized or removed by competent medical care, wise counsel and the concerted effort by the one in need.

There's a story about a farmer in Maine who was seated on a wagon drawn by two horses. "Tell me," he called out to a bystander, "how long does this hill last?" "Hill nothing," was the reply. "Your rear wheels are off." Even the casual observer was able to help that man know of his handicap.

Sometimes a friend or enemy's comment can make us aware of ours.

It's also helpful to see each handicap in a larger perspective and not magnify it out of proportion to what ought to be its inhibiting power. A little child breaks a toy and his whole world is shattered. He is unable to see this one incident in perspective to the whole of life. Sometimes adults become frustrated, anxious and defeated by handicaps that do not deserve centrality.

Charles Eliot, one of Harvard's greatest presidents, was born with a facial disfigurement. It would have been for him a handicap or a source of embarrassment, but he was fortunate to have a wise mother who said to him, "Son, it is not possible for you to get rid of this facial disfigurement. Surgeons say that nothing can be done, but it is possible for you,

with God's help, to grow a mind and soul so big that people will forget to look at your face." He did just that.

Thus far I have mentioned three principles for life that are found in this story from the Book of Acts: 1. God works through ordinary people, not just superstars. 2. We are members of one another and we need each other. 3. We all have handicaps, but that need not deter us.

There is yet one more principle imbedded in this story of Jesus turning over his ministry to his early followers who were ordinary people.

Two very important days in every life are the day we are born and the day when we know

why we were born. But there are many living and dead who never experience that second day.

Isaac Watts once wrote:

> Most people creep into the world
> And know no reason why they were born
> Except to consume the corn and fish
> And leave behind an empty dish.

What a pity it is if a person comes to the time when he or she must die only to discover he or she never really lived.

The most tragic kind of funeral service a minister is called upon to conduct is for the person who has never learned to live--that

individual who comes to the final hour with no friends, and has contributed nothing with the time and talents entrusted to him or her.

William Menninger (Karl's brother) a brilliant psychiatrist in his own right and a devoted Christian, toured the country for years as a lecturer and consultant. He was frequently asked the secret of a good, happy and useful life. His answer was usually the same. "Find a worthwhile mission in life and take it seriously."

The commitments that people make to values beyond themselves are manifested in many ways--in their families, their community, their vocation, their religious life, in the standards they set for themselves and in the way they

treat other people.

The final principle this story from the Book of Acts is underscoring is that people can achieve meaning in their lives only if they have made commitments to the development of their own highest possibilities, commitments to loved ones and to all humanity and a commitment to the divine power beyond themselves. William James summed it up in one sentence. "The great use of life is to spend it, for something that outlasts it." That's what Jesus asks his followers to do. Amen.