

A High Impact Life: Starting Small

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October 6, 2019

Luke 15:1-6

Today's Scripture is one that goes with our sermon series "The High Impact Life" but in a slightly unusual way. I hope you'll listen to this Scripture and hear God's call on us to do these small things. We often think that a "high impact life" means that we have to do something blockbuster-ish or world changing. Yet there is a small call on each of our lives. Please listen as Thomas reads the Scripture.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'" Luke 15:1-6 (NRSV)

Would you pray with me this morning? *Gracious and loving Father, we come together this morning to bring you glory and praise. You are truly wonderful, powerful and gracious. We thank you that you are at work redeeming this broken and hurting world. We thank you that we can find moments of joy and love and peace. We thank you that you have heard our ear to hear our requests and our supplications, that you desire to be present with your people. Lord, hear our prayers this morning, spoken and unspoken. Some of us come here because it's what we always do, go through motions, following the rhythm of our family unit. Yet we sit in the pew irritable, restless, discontent, and hungry for something more. Hungry for someone more.*

Some of us can't stop worrying about how a certain situation will turn out, test results, college admissions, applications and all that. Interviews, sales quotas, relational brokenness, all of it is on our mind. Some of us, Lord, feel that we are the creator of our biggest problems and we can't step out of the shame and guilt and the cycle of destruction. And some of us, Lord, need to hear once again that our loved ones are in your care and that we are in your care.

So, hear our cry, O Lord, whatever we've come carrying into this place. Draw near, O Lord, pour out your spirit on us here and loosen our grip. Help us to turn our wills and our lives over to you. We join the cry of the Israelites, your people, in saying "God, we ask you to heal our land. We ask you to heal our planet. You spoke the world into being and you charge us to care for it."

We remember this calling today, Lord. Call us into a deeper understanding of our part in creation care. And, Lord, unite us as your body this morning on World Communion Sunday. Unite us as we worship with Christians all over the world. Unite us as we live on mission in this world. We pray all these things in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I would like to be a person who is full of whimsy, but I am not. It is not in my nature. Everything for me has to make sense. So, for me if I do X then it has to happen that Y occurs, and if it doesn't, then what is even the point of doing it? I want everything to balance and be worth my time. That's a question I ask a lot – "Is it worth my time? Is it going to be worthwhile? Does this make sense? Is this a good investment?" There's like a right and a wrong answer to everything or at least that's what the world tells us. The world tells us to ask, "Does this make sense?" And to ask it about everything we do.

The Kingdom of God turns all that upside down. In the Kingdom of God things just don't make sense. This Scripture is a great example of that. We have a shepherd that goes out after one sheep, and that does not make sense. Let me tell you that that does not make leadership sense; it does not make economic sense. The idea that he would give up the glory of 99 sheep for the one doesn't make sense.

The hillsides of Judea are not like the Texas Hill Country. It is rocky and craggy and there are places where sheep and animals and mountain goats that are designed for that terrain can get, but humans never will. That shepherd may never have caught up to the sheep. And there are predators. There are hyenas, leopards, and by the time the shepherd catches up to the sheep, there may not be a sheep. Then he has all these other 99 sheep that he's left. Now sheep are not the brightest creatures in the animal kingdom. They stray. So, he's essentially risking losing 99 sheep just for the sake of this one.

Luke even tells us by the terminology that he uses to describe this story, how intensely the shepherd was when he was searching for this one sheep even at the risk of the others. It says in the Greek that when it translates the word *he left*, it's *katalepo* which means that he left permanently – like in a sense of he abandoned it. There's a perfectly good Greek word meaning

to leave that could have been used – it's *lepo*. But Luke used the modifier because he wanted us to see that it was so important that this shepherd went after this one sheep that he was willing to leave the others, no matter what might come.

Jesus tells this story to the Pharisees by asking “Who among you having 100 sheep...?” And let me tell you their answer would be “None of us. None of us have 100 sheep.” Having 100 sheep in Jesus’ time was almost unheard of. To have 100 sheep meant you were rich. So, these people can’t even relate.

What Jesus is saying is that this shepherd who has the glory of this enormous flock – who has 99 followers that he’s willing to leave - he’s going to let go of the glory, the income stream, of all these kinds of faceless sheep because he wants to go after one that’s lost. That doesn’t make sense except in the Kingdom of God.

We would rather go after and herd up and keep the 99. It’s the big thing. That’s the glory - that we would go after the one – the faceless nameless little sheep that wandered off. We have tunnel vision in the way we see what we’re called to do in our interpretation of what God calls us.

I want you to imagine you being in a car and driving through a tunnel. My husband’s grandmother lived in Machipongo, Virginia and it’s a small town on the southern side of Delmarva peninsula. Traditionally by car you’d have to go into Delaware, then drive all the way down the peninsula to get there. But then they built this tunnel that went under Chesapeake Bay. But what was interesting about it was that you’d enter the tunnel and you could see light up ahead of you. You’d go under the water, but you’d come up and there’s an island and you’d go back under the water and you’d come up again and you’re in Machipongo.

You could always see ahead of you this light, so you knew what you were going toward. But you didn’t quite know what was around you. Were you under water? Were you under land? You don’t know because it’s a mystery since you couldn’t see any of it. And that is a little like what happens in our lives. We can see this pin prick of a goal in front of us. It’s of the blockbuster, world changing thing, but we forget that there are people right around us. We don’t even see, and we lose our peripheral vision for the people on either side of us, for the people God has put directly into our lives. We get so obsessed with this big goal that we forget that God is calling us to the people already around us.

I’m sure you have heard people wax poetic, maybe you’ve even felt this way sometimes. “I’m going to solve hunger in India.” “Or, I’m going to take care of poverty in Venezuela.”

People have these grand ideas and they start organizations and they fail to see that we have hungry people here. And there are people who are impoverished and they're only a stone's throw away from us.

What would the Kingdom of God look like if we said, "You know, maybe I won't build an orphanage in Haiti but I'm going to read to children once a week through Kid's Hope and be a mentor?" What if you didn't build water wells in Central America but you carried around bottles of water in your car and you gave them to homeless folks that you saw? What would be the impact on the Kingdom of God if you did not solve poverty in Ethiopia, but you bought a couple of extra cans of food every time you were to the grocery store without fail and you donated them to the food pantry?

I think we all want to be Mother Teresa. It's part of our human nature that we all want to have this big thing that we can do.

I want you to listen to the words of Mother Teresa when she received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. It's a little bit different than what we might see. She said: "Love begins at home and it is not how much we do, but how much love we put into the action that we do. If we could only remember that God loves us, and we have an opportunity to love others as he loves us, not in big things, but in small things with great love. We'd smile at each other, make time for each other. I want you to find the poor right here. Right in your own home first and begin there. Be that good news to your own people and find out about your next-door neighbor. Do you actually know who they are?"

The question before us today is, are we so focused on being Mother Teresa and having the big recognition and doing the big thing, or will we heed her call and find out who our next-door neighbor is? To have great love in the small acts.

There's a phenomenon that sociologists and psychologists write about and it's called the "Dare to be Great moment." It's the idea that people are going about their normal lives and they just are waiting for this moment, this opportunity, this job or this thing that's going to come up. Then all of a sudden, they're going to seize it and it will be great. They'll take the opportunity and they'll dare to be great. But often it's something that comes about that they haven't even done work for. And everyone has this idea that at some point they're going to have this opportunity and dare to be great, and they've missed every single daily call to be great in their own lives. They've missed every call that God has given them each and every day to do something great right around them.

You can't do big things authentically if you won't do the small things first, if you won't do the little things, if you won't pay attention to the little people around you. God has put your family, your friends, and your co-workers but also like your kids' teacher or the person who cuts your hair and the people who cut your grass right in your path. God has put them around you on purpose. And if you won't take care of these people in small ways, if you're waiting for moment when you get to do the big thing, it's never going to come.

My grandmother loves to be hospitable, to show people hospitality. She likes to have people over, to make them feel welcome in her home. She kind of pulls out the "big guns" when she has people over. Sometimes it's her book club, sometimes it's people from out of town who are visiting, sometimes my grandfather when he was alive, it would be his clients. And she'd pull out all the china and crystal and the silver and it'd be a big deal.

Every time a family member of ours would have a celebration and there were a lot because my grandmother has four children and 14 grandchildren and most of us are married, all the time there's something to celebrate. She would do the same thing for us, much to the chagrin of her grandchildren who had to do the dishes. None of this was dishwasher-safe, she'd tell you. So, it was all done by hand.

And we'd ask "Why did you pull out all of this fancy stuff? Like for maybe a 23rd birthday – who cares? It's not even a big one!" And she would say, "If I'm not going to do it for you all, who else will I even pull it out for? Who matters as much as my family, as much as the people who are right in the midst of my life?"

St. Therese of Lisieux always said, "Don't look for more fascinating people to love. Love the people around you." We know deep down in our hearts the call for my grandmother, from God, to love the people right around you, to make an impact on those people is what God wants us to do.

The problem is, the world says "Do more! Be more! Hustle more! Strive more!" Bigger is better. What is your life worth if it can't be measured in world changing impact?

A couple of years ago my aunt gave me a book called *The Little Way of Rehealing* and it was written by a man named Rod Dyer who is a journalist from South Louisiana, near where I am from. When he was 18, he left, and he never looked back. He's from the small town of St. Francisville and it has two thousand people. He thought, "My parents, my sister, they have a small life and I'm going to do something big."

So, he went off and joined the editorial board of the Dallas Morning News and he was on the staff of the New York Post as their film critic. He was in New York for 9/11 and reported on that and many other political and cultural things over the years. He had a big career. He did what he set out to do. He did something big.

Then about ten years ago his sister was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer so he started returning home more regularly so he could visit her. What he found was that that small life hadn't limited her. It enhanced her life. She invested in relationships, she knew everyone in town. She mentored at-risk kids in the school, she would put candles on graves in the cemetery at Christmas so people wouldn't be forgotten. She would buy presents for neighbors who were impoverished so they could share with one another. When she was sick and bedridden from the chemo, she would make a list and still pray by name for people every night, the names of people that represented real relationships.

When she died, more than 1000 people waited for 4 hours in the rain to get into the local Methodist church to pay their respects. She exemplified the love in small ways that make a big impact.

I quoted St. Therese of Lisieux a minute ago and I'm going to do it again. She said, "What matters in life are not great deeds but great love." It's that love that adds up and makes an impact.

There are probably maybe 700 people in here right now. If all 700 of you went out and made an impact on 10 people in the world. I'm going to give you your whole lifetime to accomplish this challenge I'm about to set before you. This isn't to be done in the next year. But if in your life you made an impact on ten people and then those people went out and made an impact on ten more people, and those people went out and made an impact on still 10 more people. We're talking three generations. You would affect the lives of 700,000 people. That's world changing.

But that doesn't happen because one of you sitting in the row right here says, "I'm going to do something and I'm going to affect the lives of 700,000 people. I'm going to do it and I'm going to wait for that opportunity and what's it going to be? And one day God's going to call me and I'm going to change the lives of 700,000 people." No, it happens because every single one of you says, "I'm going to be intentional in my relationships." All of you. You say, "I'm going to find 10 people and I'm going to impact their lives for the better. I'm going to turn them loose." What we do on a small scale, on a quiet scale, on a scale maybe no one ever sees is what matters.

When Barbara Bush was the First Lady, she was giving a speech one time about what the White House was going to do, what her husband was going to do about the changing tide of culture in America. She responded, “Your success as a family, our success as a nation does not depend on what happens in the White House. It depends on what happens at your house.”

What we all do individually has an incredible impact. That is what God uses to build the Kingdom of God.

Let’s get back to the sheep. Is it transformational to go after one sheep? Is it transformational to mentor one kid? Is it transformational to offer forgiveness to one person – against someone you’ve been holding a grudge? Is it transformational to sit on the floor with your child and put your phone away and look them in the eye and make sure they know how important they are? Is it transformational to invite your neighbors over to dinner to learn their neighbors, one by one by one?

We will never know the true impact of each of our little acts. But we know, just like loaves and fishes, God takes our meager offerings, our small things – when we love the people right around us, God takes that, and God uses that to multiply the Kingdom. We can be a part of that. We don’t have to wait for our “Dare to be Great Moment.” Jump in, right now, and be a part of all of God’s great work!

Let’s pray together. *Almighty God, far too often we are waiting for something big or we have our eyes set on some goal that we kind of made up, that you didn’t even set before us. We just decided that was our thing. So, we’re blind to the people right around us and the opportunities right around us. God, I pray that you would humble us, that you would help us open ourselves up to the people you have placed in our lives, so that we might love them fully. And that would change the world, these small impacts all put together. We love you and we pray this in your name, Amen.*