

Making the Impossible Possible

Yesterday was the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. Francis was a humble friar who started one of the most revolutionary movements in the history of Christianity – the Franciscan Order. Today Franciscans encompass friars, nuns, and lay persons. Up until the time of Francis, religious orders were monastic – monks and nuns lived in enclosed communities. Francis wanted his friars to be in the world, to proclaim the gospel, work with the poor, do good works, be missionaries in the Holy Land, and witness the love of Christ to all people. By the time Francis died in 1226 at the age of 45, his Order had spread throughout Western Christendom reshaping the face of Europe.

When you study Francis, you have got to be amazed at his success. What did he do to have such an enormous impact on Western culture? I think the answer lies in his advice to his followers. He said, “Start by doing what is necessary; then do what is possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.”

Take that advice to heart. When you look at the challenges the church faces today, or the problems in the world, and the uncertainty about the future, it is easy to freeze into inaction – to throw up our hands and say that the obstacles are just too formidable, too overwhelming for us to make any impact.

This Tuesday I will begin leading on Zoom five workshops on my book *Culture Shift* for the Diocese of Montreal. Along with the Diocese of Quebec, Montreal is struggling to survive in a Province where very few people attend church anymore. There are beautiful churches in Quebec but many of them were built with government funds before 1960 when the Catholic Church and the Provincial government were closely tied together. Today the Province of Quebec is radically secular, and the National Assembly is about to pass a bill that prohibits public prayer. A bill has already passed that bans wearing religious symbols and garb by public employees, including teachers, bus drivers, and clerks. The situation for people of faith is very dire.

Thankfully, we don't have that problem in this country. The Charlie Kirk funeral had as many as 300,000 worshippers, both inside and outside the stadium, including the President and Vice-President of the United States.

Some social commentators believe America is experiencing a religious revival. If the recent Barna report is accurate, Generation Z – the children born in the 21st century – is now more interested in attending church than any other age group. Churches that reach Generations X and Z will grow.

And yet, we all know churches that are barely surviving. So, when the apostles said to Jesus, “Increase our faith,” they were speaking for us. They weren’t sure they were up to the task. It may surprise us how Jesus responds to their request. He tells them that if only they had faith as tiny as a mustard seed – no bigger than a grain of sand – they could say to the mighty mulberry tree with its 600-year-old roots that can break rock into pieces, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea.” The mustard seed. The mulberry tree. The contrast could not be more startling. Jesus is saying, “Start with the little faith you have, and you will do amazing things.” Or, as St. Francis put it: “Start by doing what is necessary; then do what is possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.”

The British Bible translator J.B. Phillips authored a book called *Your God is Too Small*. In it he noted our tendency to bring God down to our own size. We want a manageable, reasonable, and not too supernatural God who doesn’t move us out of our comfort zone. But sometimes the only reasonable thing to do is to take that leap of faith and trust God. The Bible says that faith has the power to move mountains. It has the power to revive the church, to change hearts and minds, and to spread the kingdom of God over the whole earth.

Jesus is saying to his disciples and to us, “Your problem isn’t a lack of faith. It doesn’t take much faith to do sensational things. What it takes is commitment. What it takes is determination, and persistence and a will to persevere to the end.”

Some of you who are Ohio State fans will be interested in this story. Back in the late 1940s there was a football player at Ohio State named Bucky Wertz. He was a “walk on” linebacker who stood only 5’6” tall. When he showed up for his first practice the coach was shocked. Bucky was too small to play as a linebacker. The other players would kill him. The coach told Bucky he couldn’t play.

The next day Bucky was back in uniform. The coach called him over and said, “I told you I had cut you from the squad. You’re too small; these guys will kill you.”

With a firm, committed voice, Bucky said, “Coach, with due respect, you nor no one else can prevent me from playing football for my school.” The coach was shocked. He allowed Bucky to stay on the squad.

In the third game of the season, Bucky finally got to play. He made every tackle for the time he was in the game. He started every game for the rest of the season and led the team in tackles.

The next season Bucky grew to 5’8” and weighed 168 pounds. Again, he led the team in tackles. Every season, junior and senior years, was the same.

On January 1, 1950, Ohio State played USC in the Rose Bowl. USC had an all-American fullback, weighing 240 pounds, who was the finest running back in the nation. Bucky was assigned to “rover” this fullback. The fullback never gained a yard. Bucky hit him behind the line every time he had the ball. Ohio State won in a shocking upset.

A little faith and a lot of demanding work made Bucky Wertz champion. The problem, Jesus was saying to his disciples, is not that you have too little faith. The problem is that you are not applying the faith you have.

Christians, of course, have more than just a “can do” attitude. We have Jesus. With all the challenges we face in the church and world, the only way to make the impossible possible is through faith in Jesus. Until Jesus permeates every fiber of our being, we can never begin to appreciate the power and potentiality available to us. We continue to doubt whether we can do this or that or be what we want to be. Yet, God wants us to reach the heights of our created potential. God wants us to develop a faith that can manage both problems and opportunities.

In our gospel, Jesus is saying that the difference between failure and success in the kingdom of God is not so much a matter of resources as it is of faith. A tiny bit of faith can do amazing things.

Many of you know that my daughter Allison is a resident at Treasure House in Glendale. It’s a beautiful community for young adults with intellectual

and developmental disabilities founded in 2018 by Kurt and Brenda Warner. Kurt, football fans may know, is the former quarterback of the Arizona Cardinals – and now a co-owner of the team. When the couple could not find any suitable place for their son Zachary, who has special needs, they had a dream about starting a residence where Zach and others could flourish in a community of love, acceptance, and support. As committed Christians, they found a verse in Scripture that spoke to them about their dream. It was Matthew 6:21: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Based on that verse, they named the new community Treasure House.

It is amazing what you can do with just a little faith and a whole lot of commitment, determination, and perseverance. You can move mountains, but you also can build residences, change hearts, and make the world a kinder, gentler place. Think of Golden Sun where Jonathan Dombek lives. That residence for people with special needs was started by an ordinary Mennonite church in a modest part of Glendale. Today Golden Sun is prospering and has just acquired another home to house three more residents.

“Start by doing what is necessary; then do what is possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.” I see the power of Francis’ advice permeating the metro Phoenix area. When Mimi and Joseph Rogers, whose daughter Dylan has Down syndrome, found that there was no available day program for her, they established One Step Beyond. Today One Step Beyond has 280-day residents in Glendale, Surprise and Scottsdale, and plans are underway for even further expansion.

I could go on... there are so many miracle stories of people who see the need and do what needs to be done. Thanks to their work, the Phoenix region is now one of the prime areas for people with autism, and intellectual and developmental disabilities in North America. It wasn’t always this way, but people were determined to make the impossible possible.

You may think, “Well, I am not entrepreneurial or a risk taker or an innovator, what can I do?” Well, neither was St. Francis an entrepreneur, and he certainly did not have a lot of money, but he had faith. Focus not on what you can’t do but what you can do. Everyone has ability to make some impact on someone else’s life. There’s nothing that’s too small to make a difference. You can go down the street, within a mile of your house, and find

someone who is hurting. Find a need and meet it, connect with people who hurt and help them.

Father John Dear is a Roman Catholic priest now working in the Diocese of Monterey, California. In his earlier life, he was a parish priest in Long Island, New York. He wrote of a parishioner who throughout her life was passionate about justice issues. She was a strong peace advocate, and worked tirelessly for racial reconciliation and reform of the criminal justice system. Just before she died, she said to her priest, “Father, I figured out the meaning of life!”

“Really?” said the priest.

She said, “When you’re a child and a teenager, you serve. When you are in your twenties and beginning life and starting a family, you serve. When you are in your thirties and forties, you serve. When you are middle aged, you serve. When you are in your sixties and seventies and starting to retire, you serve. When you move into your eighties and start to slow down, you serve. When you get sick, you serve. When you are dying, you serve. On your last day, as you die, you serve.”¹

That’s true. You serve. Without fuss. Sometimes with little recognition and not a lot of glory. It’s only when you enter the gates of heaven to be received into the arms of Jesus that you hear the ultimate words of commendation: “Well done, my good and faithful servant. Come, share my joy.”

Christians serve – that’s what we do. We serve because there is one who first served us. We are not seeking to work our way into heaven. That is already guaranteed because of what Jesus did on the cross. Our salvation came about because once long ago the Lord of the universe was willing to take upon himself the role of a servant. Now God calls us to service. Not because it will look good on our resume, not because we will be praised for it, but because service is what we do. Jesus became a servant for us, and we now serve in his name as his followers.

The disciples asked Jesus for more faith. There is no record that Jesus granted their request. They didn’t need more faith. What they needed was simply to show up for duty. He would give them what they needed, but first they needed to show up. They needed to say with Isaiah the prophet, “Here am I, send me” (Is. 6:8).

The Rev. Dr. Gary Nicolosi
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Text – Luke 17: 5-10
Proper 22, C
Advent Episcopal Church, Sun City West, AZ

1. www.johndear.org/sermons.