

But It Seems Like Too Little
John 14.8-17; 25-27
May 27, 2007 – Pentecost Sunday
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“Among the earliest sayings of the Desert Monastics, one of the oldest stories passed from generation to generation, was a story about the purpose of work. *“One day a holy monastic was going to town to sell some small articles in order to buy food to live on. A paralytic on the roadside said, ‘Where are you going, Teacher?’ And when the monastic said [he was going] to town, the paralytic said, ‘Would you do me the favor of carrying me there with you?’ So the Teacher carried the paralytic into the town. Then the paralytic said, ‘You can just put me down where you sell your wares.’ And the Teacher did so. When the monastic sold an article, the paralytic said, ‘What did you sell it for?’ And when the monastic stated the price, the paralytic said, ‘Will you buy me a cake with that?’ And the Teacher did so. When the selling time was over, the paralytic said, ‘Now will you do me the favor of carrying me back to the place you found me?’ And once more the Teacher did so. When they arrived at the place where the Teacher had found the paralyzed beggar, the paralytic said, ‘You are filled with divine blessings, in heaven and on earth,’ and disappeared. Then the monastic realized that the paralytic had really been an angel, sent to try both spirit and flesh.* Here, in this simple monastic story of the right of the wounded in society to make themselves part of our worlds and to profit from the fruit of our labors, all the modern-day attitudes toward work go awry. In the monastic mind, work is not for profit. In the monastic mentality, work is for giving, not just for gaining. In the monastic spirituality, other people have a claim on what we do. Work is not a private enterprise. Work is not to enable me to get ahead; the purpose of work is to enable me to get more human and to make my world more just.” (Weavings, Volume

VIII, Number 1, January/February 1993, “Work: Participation in Creation,” Joan Chittister, O.S.B, page 8)

But toting a paralytic man to and from town and feeding him one piece of cake **seems like too little**. Just like going to New Orleans to clean up one yard of one neighborhood in the Lower 9th Ward **seems like too little** when an entire community has been wiped out. Just like cooking one meal, in that same neighborhood, to feed one small group of people gathered for a street party in a desolated and destroyed community **seems like too little** when people need jobs more than they need parties. Just like housing 14 people for Room in the Inn **seems like too little** when there are hundreds who are homeless and cold on every other Saturday night in the winter. Just like opening our Fellowship Hall three mornings a week for Crisis Assistance **seems like too little** given the vast amount of poverty and need in Mecklenburg County. Just like preparing one meal for a grieving family **seems like too little** in the face of such deep sadness.

I think it is our inability to categorize these kinds of things as greater than anything Jesus did that keeps us from doing more. We are into comparisons in such an unhealthy way. And when we come across someone that we believe we cannot measure up to, we instantly feel defeated and take on the attitude of failure. We have so relegated Jesus to his pedestal that he is no longer like one of us. We revere him. We worship him. We adore him. We wish we were like him. But the fact is that because of the way that we have treated him, he is no longer attainable to us. His Way is out of our reach. And I think this attitude allows us to excuse ourselves from our calling. Maybe that’s why many preferred to be called “Christian” instead of the label of the early believers. “Follower of

the Way” of Jesus is too concrete. Too real. Too costly. “Christian” sounds nicer. Easier. More manageable.

Last Sunday, four of us worshipped with Corinthians Missionary Baptist #2 for 2 ½ hours. And Pastor Johnson did some preaching. The Holy Spirit swept through there one week early, I do believe. He laid it on us. “When you are at your lowest that is when God starts preparing the hearts of others. What I learned in Katrina was that I’d better be getting ready for a blessing ‘cause I’m going to be meeting people I’ve never met before. [Of course, referencing those of us who were there to partner with his church.] When the government saw us as invisible, that’s when God was working on the hearts of people we did not know from far away. And now they will go home and tell their constituents that not all people in New Orleans are gun-toting gang-bangers – some of them are there praising the Lord – that we are real people, experiencing real things, living real lives – and they will go back and tell, ‘We are praising the Lord!’ Jesus is a friend. When you have no shelter, no clothes – Jesus is a friend. I’m not telling you something I’ve heard or something I’ve read. I’m telling you something I know. I have come by here to tell you that it may not make sense, but it makes miracles.”

I firmly believe that our presence there last Sunday was one of those greater works that Jesus was talking about. It seems like too little, but I assure you, it wasn’t. We didn’t do much – in the big scheme of things – but Russ charged us in our commissioning the week before to “do something.” And we did. And it was enough. We will never live up to our calling as followers of Jesus – we will never live up to all that it means to be Christian – if we believe that because most issues are so big and overwhelming that we will have no impact. Why bother? I can’t solve the issues in the Middle East. I can’t

correct centuries of racism and sexism. I can't bring an end to world hunger or make affordable housing accessible in Mecklenburg County. But I can do something. And I believe that is what Jesus would call an attitude of "greater work" than even he did. If we take him seriously, then we will take him at his word and believe in ourselves just as much as God believes in us.

In my first job – right out of seminary – I found a video Bible study series that I thought would be perfect to use on Sunday nights with my college students. This was cutting edge stuff 18 years ago! One particular segment of that video series has stuck with me all these years. It was designed for the group to watch a 15 minute clip of Tony Campolo, a popular evangelical sociologist that has become famous for his directness with audiences especially dealing with issues of justice. After viewing the clip, there were questions offered to prompt discussion. In one particular lecture, Campolo used our text for today – a text that before that video I had never noticed before. But it made an impact on me and for these 18 years this shas been a passage of scripture that I would list as one of my favorites and has done as much to shape my faith's journey as anything. *The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.* (John 14.12) No way. Impossible.

"I was in Haiti. I checked on our missionary work there. We run 75 small schools back in the hills of Haiti. I came to the little Holiday Inn where I always stay and shower and clean up before I board the plane to go home. I left the taxi and was walking to the entrance of the Holiday Inn when I was intercepted by three girls. I call them girls because the oldest could not have been more than 15. And the one in the middle said, 'Mister, for \$10 I'll do anything you want me to do. I'll do it all night long. Do you know

what I mean?' I did know what she meant. I turned to the next one and I said, 'What about you, could I have you for \$10?' She said yes. I asked the same of the third girl. She tried to mask her contempt for me with a smile but it's hard to look sexy when your 15 and hungry. I said, 'I'm in room 210, you be up there in just 10 minutes. I have \$30 and I'm going to pay for all 3 of you to be with me all night long.' I rushed up to the room, called down to the concierge desk and I said I want every Walt Disney video that you've got in stock. I called down to the restaurant and said, 'Do you still make banana splits in this town, because if you do I want banana splits with extra ice cream, extra everything. I want them delicious, I want them huge, I want *four* of them!' The little girls came and the ice cream came and the videos came and we sat at the edge of the bed and we watched the videos and laughed until about one in the morning. That's when the last of them fell asleep across the bed. And as I saw those little girls stretched out asleep on the bed, I thought to myself, nothing's changed, nothing's changed. Tomorrow they will be back on the streets selling their little bodies to dirty, filthy johns because there will always be dirty, filthy johns who for a few dollars will destroy little girls. Nothing's changed. I didn't know enough Creole to tell them about the salvation story, but the word of the spirit said this: but for one night, for one night you let them be little girls again. I know what you're going to say: 'You're not going to compare that with Jesus walking on water.' No, I'm not, for very obvious reasons. If Jesus was to make a decision which is the greater work, walking on water or giving one night of childhood back to 3 little girls who had it robbed from them -- giving one night of joy to 3 little girls that armies had marched over -- which do you think Jesus would consider the greater work, walking on water or ministering to those 3 little girls. And Jesus said, 'The work that I do, Ye shall

do and greater works than these shall Ye do because I go unto my Father.' I can't replicate the power acts of God in Jesus Christ, but every time I perform an act of love in his name, I am imitating Jesus and he is saying, 'Well done thou good and faithful servant.'" ("Doing Greater Things" First air date October 6, 1996, from a video discussion series "Carpe Diem")

We've got to learn to start thinking like that. We've got to stop living as if our hands are tied. Because we can't fix everything most often we fix nothing. 6It seems to me that the only way we miss our calling is when we do nothing. But when we claim the power of the inbreaking of the Spirit, we hold the potential to repeat the very works of Jesus – and even greater works – and that will never be too little. May it be so.