

Insitutions are being challenged  
and forced to change.

"TENDING THE COMMON TASK IN AN UNCOMMON WORLD"

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INTRODUCTION The historians tell us that we are living through the greatest world revolution since the downfall of the Roman Empire. Old patterns and established forms are breaking up. Human society has been shaken at the very foundations. The simplicity of an old world has been overwhelmed by the complexity of a new world. And it is in this setting that you and I must seek for some significance in our daily round.

It can be said that we live our common days in an altogether uncommon world. And for some, this present a problem that can be difficult to handle. How can we count in a world that has become so big, so complex, and moves with such startling speed.

Logan Pearsall Smith wrote a book called TRIVIA, and then he added a section and called it MORE TRIVIA, and finally he concluded it with still another section which he entitled ALL TRIVIA. This describes the mood for many of us as we find our lives absorbed by unimportant matters as world shaking decisions and world shaking matters take place around us. Listen to what he wrote on the first page:

"I woke this morning out of dreams into what we call Reality, into the daylight, the furniture of my familiar bedroom - in fact into the well-known, often discussed but, to my mind, as yet unexplained Universe. Then I, who came out of Eternity and seem to be on my way thither, got up and spent the day as I usually spent it. I read, I puttered, I complained and took my daily exercise; and I sat down punctually to eat the meals that appeared at regular intervals."

Call it, if you will, a protest against small things, unimportant things in great times - a protest against doing the common task in an uncommon world. What can be said about this problem?

I. IMPORTANCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL For one thing, we need to recover the truth about the individual - to be reminded that the individual counts more than any other power in the world.

There are times when the problems of the world appear to us as massive, immovable objects. To be sure, they are. But to understand the root cause of problems, we must break down the massiveness of society until we reach the component parts. If a building shows sign of decay, signs of crumbling, one does not condemn the whole structure. Not at all. One studies the blocks that form the foundations and the bricks that make the walls. This takes us to the heart of the matter. Individuals - you and I - are the component parts of society.

Look back over the last thirty years. What was it that helped to make possible the great tragedy of tyranny in our time? Can we not say that in part it was the individual German who maintained a discreet silence when Hitler grew in power? Can we not say that it was the individual Italian who submitted weakly to Mussolini and his ruthless reign. Or the individual Japanese who remained passive while the War Party set the nation on its tragic course. Or the individual Russian who tolerated a Communist party until it grew into a thing of evil. The sin of silence on the part of the individual. Think of it as it relates to some of the struggles taking place in our own day - struggles between right and wrong.

Milton once said that he could not praise a "fugitive and cloistered virtue". Nor can we! A "fugitive and cloistered virtue" - nations have been betrayed because of a "fugitive and cloistered virtue" on the part of individuals. Remember this when you are tempted to think that your life is a small and insignificant thing set in the midst of great times.

You think the individual does not count. There were those who said that about the death of Socrates. They said the Greeks condemned him - but it wasn't quite that simple. There was a jury of 501 men - 281 of them voted for his death, 220 for his acquittal. There were those who said that Jesus was crucified by the Jews. That isn't the full story. It was Judas who betrayed him, an individual. It was Pilate who washed his hands of him - an individual. It was Peter who denied him. A small group of leaders in Jerusalem opposed him because he was challenging old and outworn ideas. ~~And if a few of the individuals who were present on Good Friday had taken the lead in speaking out for him instead of remaining silent - things might have been different.~~

You and I may think that we do not count. But why do you suppose that public opinion polls exist? It is because ONE plus ONE is extremely important. Look at a stone cutter hammering away at his rock, perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet - at the 101st blow it will split in two. It was not just that last blow that did it, but all that had gone before. This is the truth about the importance of the individual: his belief and his action may be as the tiny blow of one hammer. But, let his belief and his action be repeated and let it be strengthened by others, and it shall determine the size and shape of the world.

## II. PERFORM THE SMALL TASK

Now another thing that ought to be said about this problem that we are considering today is this: you and I need to do the small things that are immediately at hand rather than wait for some big and dramatic task in the far off future. D. W. Lardridge puts it in rather colorful language: "IT IS BETTER FOR MANY OF US TO BE CHEERFUL AND USEFUL TURNIPS THAN TO POSE ALL OUR LIVES AS LUXURIOUS VINES ABOUT TO BE"

The poet reminds us:

"Dream not of noble service elsewhere wrought;  
The simple duty that awaits thy hand  
Is god's voice uttering a divine command,  
Life's common deeds build all that saints have  
taught!"

The point is this: our lives take on meaning and significance when we do what we can do, rather than hold back for some distant moment when we think a more important or dramatic task might be possible. You dream of writing a great novel some day; write a helpful note today. You dream of some distant time when peace will come to the world; go out and make peace with your neighbor today. You dream of the time when you will be free to carry your share of civic and religious work to be done in your community; get busy today and do what you can do. You dream of the time when you will be able to give lavishly to carry on the work of the church; get busy today on giving the small gift that you can now afford. The individual finds his place in the order of things when he stops waiting for the great and dramatic moments and does willingly and cheerfully what he can do today.

Edward Sill wrote these lines. Listen to them carefully.

You dream of being more active in terms of civil rights and healing the wounds between the races; get busy and reach out to the person of color in this congregation. Be a friend to him.

"This I beheld or dreamed it in a dream:  
There spread a cloud of dust along a plain;  
And underneath the cloud, or n it, raged  
A furious battle and men jelled, and swords  
Chocked upon swords and shields. A prince's banner  
Wavered, then staggered backward, hemmed by foes.  
A craven hung along the battle's edge..  
And thought, 'Had I a sword of keener steel -  
That blue blade that the king's son bears - but this  
Blunt thing - !' - he snapped and flung it from his hand  
And lowering crept away and left the field.  
Then came the king's son, wounded...sore bestead,  
And weaponless, and saw the broken sword,  
Hilt buried in the dry and trodden sand,  
And ran and snatched it, and with battle shout  
Lifted afresh He hewed his enemy down,  
And saved a great cause that heroic day"

Take the thing immediately at hand; don't sit back doing nothing, waiting for some far-distant deed and time. It may never come.

### III. SIZE - NOT A MEASURE OF IMPORTANCE

There's a third truth that ought to be brought into the picture and that, of course, is this: what often seems to us to be a small thing is in fact a great thing for a great time. Size is not always a measure of importance. We tend to live in a time when size is looked upon as a virtue. The bigger the better - this seems to be a part of our American way of looking at things. Size is not always a measure of importance.

Think of Jesus and how he made small things important: a cup of cold water, a single sheep out of one hundred, a lost coin among many, the little gift of the poor widow. And when you stop to consider his own life, from our point of view it might have appeared limited and confined - he never traveled 100 miles from where he was born, his entire life spent in an area not much larger than the state of Vermont. Born, not in Rome, but born in an obscure, far off corner of the Empire.

Marion Brown Sheldon captured a truth about Jesus in these words:

"When Jesus talked upon the earth, He didn't talk with kings,  
He talked with simple people, of doing friendly things.

He didn't praise the conquerors and all their hero host,  
He said the very greatest were those who loved the most.

He didn't speak of mighty deeds and victories. He spoke  
Of feeding hungry people and cheering lonely folk.

I'm glad his words were simple words just meant for me and you,  
The things he asked were simple things that even I can do!"

We confront vast social problems, and we should meet them as sincere followers of Christ. But often it is the small thing immediately at hand that will prove to be the most important. It is right to support child welfare agencies, but let us be sure that our own child also benefits from our concern in the home. It is important to be enlightened about the issues before our national government, but let us be sure that we are informed about the crucial issues about our city government. It is good to have a concern for the Church throughout the world, but let us be sure that we have done our

utmost to strengthen the church at home. Otherwise in all these things, we shall be like Hogarth's pauper, imprisoned for debt himself, but still busy with plans for paying the debt of the British Empire.

omit [ There is an editorial in this week's issue of Life magazine that reinforces the point I am trying to make. Perhaps you've read it. It's entitled "The Urge to Serve in Washington Can Go Too Far". Let me read to you the opening paragraph and the closing paragraph.

The small things at hand are indeed important. The fate of our nation, of our world hangs on them. Think of them: your personal honesty and integrity. The kind of marriage you have made and the home you have created. The kind of parents you are to your children. The place you take in the life and work of your church. Your sense of responsible citizenship. Your scale of values. Seneca once said: GREAT IS HE WHO USES EARTHENWARE AS IF IT WERE SILVER". The earthenware of common life is yours, to treat it as silver is to be doing a great thing in a great time.

A friend called on Michelangelo who was finishing a statue. "You must have been idle since I saw you last" he said to the great artist. "By no means" replied Michelangelo. "I have retouched this part and polished that; I have softened this feature and brought out this muscle. I have given more expression to this lip and more energy to this limb". The friend replied, "But those are all trifles" "It may be so" said Michelangelo. "But trifles make perfection".

Remember that. Life may seem to you to be filled with many routine, unimportant matters - small matters - of minor consequence when placed along side the times in which we live, but remember that so many of these matters are what add up eventually to a good life, in a strong nation, in a better world for all people.

LET US PRAY Our prayer is a silent searching of our own heart and mind and conscience. Help us, O God, to lay these things to heart always remembering that the individual counts more than any other power in the world, that it is better to do the small thing at hand than to wait for the big and dramatic task in the far off future, and finally to see that size is not always a measure of importance. Remembering Jesus, we ask all this in his spirit. Amen  
and how he made small things important