

I grew up during the hippie movement. I don't know how prevalent hippies were here in Minnesota, but in California, they were everywhere. Even my babysitters were hippies. It was an era of bell bottoms and Indian tunics, free love and drugs, folk songs and protests, and Broadway musicals like "Godspell" and "Jesus Christ, Superstar". But within the hippie culture, another movement was taking place and it was called the "Jesus Movement". It started when hippies found God and spawned a new genre of music known rather appropriately as "Jesus music". Noel Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul & Mary penned "The Wedding Song (There Is Love)" during this time and it's where praise bands got their start.

There was a song by Kenn Gulikson called "Charity" and it was a musical version of 1 Corinthians 13. I loved that song. Granted, as an 8 year old, I didn't really understand the meaning behind most of the lyrics and, to be honest, I didn't know at the time that it had come straight from the Bible. But, man, I played the heck out of that cassette tape. As I grew older and my musical tastes changed, I more or less forgot that song, except for the chorus, which came to mind randomly over the years, usually when I seemed to need it. "If I have not charity, if love does not flow from me, I am nothing. Jesus, reduce me to love." It's a powerful prayer and I have those words hanging in my office.

The 1 Corinthians 13 text is a beautiful piece of poetry and has been one of my favorite passages for the past 2 or so decades. It's a popular wedding text – I even used it at my wedding. Paul, however, didn't have poetry or weddings on his mind when he wrote this to the Corinthians. At that time, the members of the Corinthian church were doing well at pursuing or exhibiting the gifts of the spirit like speaking in tongues, prophesying, healing people, etc., but they had forgotten the basic tenet of Christianity, which is love. They were doing well at the showy stuff but they forgot how to love their brothers and sisters. "If I have not love, I am nothing." If love for one another & God is not at the core of everything we do, we have accomplished. This applies to churches as well as individuals. If we have food drives or service projects or other outreach events that are not motivated by love, we are nothing more than clanging cymbals glorifying ourselves. Love must be what drives us.

I have to confess that there are days I wake up, read the news and think that the world has truly gone crazy. I despair over all of the hate that seems so rampant in society. I despair because I feel so powerless to change it. But the truth is, we are not powerless. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." But how can our actions stop the war in Syria, the massacres in the Democratic Republic of Congo, or even the sex slave trade in Duluth? Through love. Love grows exponentially: 1 act of love turns into 10, which turns into 100, which turns into 1,000, and so on. As impossible as it may sound, love really can make that kind of difference.

There is a modern parable based on Loren Eiseley's "The Star Thrower" that some of you may know. An old man was walking along the beach and in the distance he could see a figure who appeared to be dancing. He smiled at the graceful beauty of what he was witnessing. As he got closer, he could see a young man bending down to pick something up and then gently flinging it into the ocean. Moving even closer to the young man, he called out, "Good morning. What are you doing?" The young man paused and said, "Throwing starfish into the ocean." Surrounding the young man were hundreds and hundreds of starfish on the beach.

"Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?"

"The tide is going out and the starfish are stranded. If I don't throw them in, they'll die."

"Young man, don't you realize that there are hundreds, if not thousands of starfish along this beach? You can't possibly make a difference."

The young man listened politely, then bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it into the ocean. "It made difference to that one."

Most versions of this parable end right there with hopeful determination standing up to jaded pessimism. However, there is actually a longer version of this parable, still based on Eiseley's story. Here's the rest of it:

The old man became disquieted by the young man's words and walked away from him, continuing his way on down the beach. He was still so bothered that, on his way back, he pretended he didn't even see the young man and he hurried by. But the young man's actions and words continued to haunt the old man and the more he tried to put it out of

his mind, the more firmly it stayed there. Finally, the old man realized that what was troubling him was the knowledge that the young man had chosen to be an active participant in the universe rather than just a passive observer. The old man had always considered himself an active participant but realized that somewhere along the way, he had settled into passivity. With that knowledge, there was only one thing he could do. He left his house and joined the young man on the beach.

We are that old man. We say it can't really be done or it's someone else's job to take care of it or we're off the hook because we prayed about it. We enjoy the image of Christ as the beautiful dancer and we say, "Isn't Christianity wonderful?" and we're content to stay back where everything looks rosy. Up close, Christ shows us the work that needs to be done and we say, "Uh, I like the view better over there," and we choose to be passive observers. But Christianity was never intended to be a passive theology. Christianity began as a movement of active participants setting out to change the world. Christ *chose us* to be his light in this world. He has asked each and every one of us to be an active participant. Now, don't get me wrong: prayer is fundamental to our relationship with God. But it's just the first step. Love is patience and kindness and humility. It trusts and hopes and perseveres. It is not self-seeking, it is not rude, and it does not dishonor others. My challenge to you today is to love someone who bugs the heck out of you. Choose light over darkness. Choose love over hate. Choose to get up close and personal with God. Through the love and grace Christ has shown us, we *can* change the world and it starts with baby steps, one person at a time.