

Can I Really Make a Difference?

A. Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
Columbus, OH
July 20, 2025

*You got to tell me brave captain
Why are the wicked so strong?
How do the Angels get to sleep
When the Devil leaves the porch light on?*
—Tom Waits

Ancient Witness: Romans 8:26-30

You know, as people who try to apply our faith to our lives, people who try to make an imprint upon this world and transform it, it's easy to get discouraged.

The problems of the world seem to be getting bigger and bigger, and more and more complex. Technology has brought both great promise and peril. General Omar Bradley once said, "We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about killing than we do about living."

And today, in 2025, there is a sense of futility, I think, when it comes to the political process. Many people have given up, and view our system no longer as a democracy but an oligarchy, dominated by extreme wealth and corporate power. Instead of a government by the people, more and more the people are being ruled by the government, controlled by a minority autocratic power that is spreading and growing. In such a world, it is easy to feel like a small boat being tossed in a huge, vast sea. It is easy to feel alone and helpless.

It was Edna St. Vincent Millay who wrote this about the condition in which we find ourselves:

*Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts...they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun, but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric.*

There exists no loom to weave it into fabric. Our task, our responsibility, our joy, is to be weavers—*fabric makers*—to be agents of God, blending humanity and divinity, matter and spirit, facts and wisdom.

Knowledge is not wisdom. A person could be brilliant and have vast knowledge of many facts and concepts but have little wisdom. Wisdom, *Sophia* (to use the Hebrew biblical word), is a quality that is able to weave things together, to bring healing, wholeness, harmony and life.

The great author (*Zorba the Greek*) and mystic, Nikos Kazantzakis, wrote:

Every living thing is a workshop where God, in hiding, processes and transubstantiates clay... The more flesh transubstantiates into love, valor, and freedom, the more it truly becomes God.

We are beckoned to transubstantiate clay, and as we do this we become and grow into God. It is said that we are all made from the ashes of dead stars, part of a cosmic process, a never ending journey of the fabric-making of divine Wisdom. And it's in this bigger context that we can really see ourselves becoming into God, who is the alpha and the omega.

This is very close to what Paul was saying when he said, "In all things God works for good." (Romans 8:28) This passage is often misinterpreted to mean that everything that happens is good or is God's will. But there are lots of things that happen that are not God's will. Rather, it is saying that God's presence permeates all there is, working to weave it all into a fabric. It will not be merely science or technology that will save us or the earth, but it will be our cooperation with this live-giving force, the loving impulse within us.

Sometimes we can feel this harmonizing urge within ourselves or perhaps even in the church or even in many others. But still this doesn't seem to be enough. So it's helpful to remember Paul's assertion that God works for good in *all things*. We are not on our own. And even though, from our perspective, we cannot often see it, we are part of a great, monumental and universal effort.

To understand that we can make a difference means that we are profoundly aware that *we are not alone*. Albert Einstein, during a serious illness, was asked if he was afraid of death. He replied,

I feel such a sense of solidarity with all living things that it does not matter to me where the individual begins and ends.

There is a unifying connection of all living things, a connection that is not easily seen, yet one that is at the basis of life itself. This is *the* spiritual assertion, the reality signified by Holy Communion.

I understand this solidarity between all things on a certain level to be what medieval theologians meant when they defined God as "a circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere." The God within us reaches out and touches all things. Scott Russell Sanders puts it this way,

All there is to see can be seen from anywhere in the universe, if you know how to look; and the influence of the entire universe converges on every spot.

The universe converges and centers in every person and thing. God, whose circumference is nowhere, surrounds and contains all things. And because of this, God has a perspective that is boundless and a wisdom of infinite depth. And God, whose center is everywhere, is in all things, providing this expansive vision and wisdom, working for good. This is the kind of spiritual awakening we need if we are to avoid a sense of hopelessness and fatigue in our religious struggle. We are not alone. We are not even outnumbered. We are part of an eternal process that shall not be denied.

Albert Schweitzer, the great humanitarian and scholar of theology, music and medicine, talked about this timeless mystery in a simile:

There is an ocean—cold water without motion. In this ocean, however, is the Gulf Stream—hot water flowing from the Equator towards the Pole. Inquire of all scientists how it is physically imaginable that a stream of hot water flows between the waters of the ocean, which, so to speak, form its banks, the moving within the motionless, the hot within the cold: no scientist can explain it. Similarly, there is the God of love within the God of the forces of the universe—one with God, and yet so totally different. Let ourselves be seized and carried away by that vital stream.

If we want to make a difference, we allow ourselves to be seized and carried away by that vital stream, the warmth within the cold, the spirit in the matter, the unity in the brokenness. We are not on our own, but we are part of that great and vital stream, which runs underneath all things. How easy it is to struggle and despair and flounder amidst the vast, cold waters when we do not see that we are connected.

Several years ago, the great author, teacher and wisdom-seeker, Wayne Dyer, passed away. And I remember that he once said, “You have two choices in your life. You can either be a host for God or a hostage to your ego.” And he described ego as Edging God Out, E – G – O. And if we really want to make a difference, we must take that inner journey, over and over, to let the Source, the Wisdom and the Oneness flower within us.

There is an old African folktale about a sparrow that says is so well:

*The view below made the sparrow sad.
As she flew high above the withering landscape,
her tiny shadow skimmed a parched African plain.
If not for the constant sun, she thought, the air would be cool.
Plants could grow again.
Animals could thrive.
Children could play in the rain.
But the sparrow was so small,
she was helpless against the unrelenting sun.

Or was she?*

*Suddenly, she had a thought.
She flew off and excitedly chirped her idea to
a wise woodpecker who nodded in approval.
Being a sociable fellow,
the woodpecker informed a flock of pigeons,
who scattered to tell others.
Soon the skies were abuzz with the sparrow's idea:
darters and snipes, hornbills and hawks, osprey and pelicans.
Even the crows were interested.
Only the vultures turned a cold wing to the plan.*

*The day arrived—bright and hot like all the others.
 At the appointed hour, when the sun was at its height,
 the birds came.
 From east and west, from north and south,
 they flew shoulder to wing.
 They strained to fly as high as possible,
 circling in the mid-day heat.
 Plants and animals looked up in disbelief.
 The earth had suddenly cooled;
 the searing sun blocked by the great clouds of birds soaring overhead.*

*Each day the birds returned. Day after day.
 Protected from the scorching sun, the earth soon sprouted.
 Animals frolicked and people found new hope.*

*Then, for reasons that the birds did not understand,
 the sky began producing its own clouds.
 Soon, the rains came.
 The sparrow looked down and smiled.*

Her shadow was nowhere to be found.

Can I make a difference? Can I do anything about the scorching sun? The problems of our age beat down upon us and seem so large, so overwhelming, so intractable.

How can I walk this path—run this race—without getting weary, without getting discouraged, without giving up? I'm reminded of the Letter to the Hebrews that said, "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run the race before us with perseverance." (Hebrews 12:1) It helps to see that we are part of this great cloud that shields the earth from the unrelenting sun, bringing the cool shade of God's compassion and justice across the land, bringing life. We are part of a vast, endless, relentless process in which the Wisdom of God is working for good, bringing forth light from darkness and life from death.

I'll conclude with a paraphrase of some words from the Mishnah of the Talmud, attributed to the 2nd century Rabbi Tarfon:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justice, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)