

You've probably heard this story before. But it is one of my favorites, so you are stuck with hearing it again.

There was a man out walking a deserted beach at sunset. As he strolled along, he saw another man in the distance. As he grew nearer, he noticed that the other man kept leaning down, picking something up and throwing it out into the water. Time and again, he kept picking things up and tossing them into the ocean.

As the two got even closer, he notice the other man was picking up starfish that had been washed up on the beach and – one at a time –he was throwing them back into the water.

The man was puzzled. He approached the star fish thrower and said, "I'm just wondering what you're doing?"

"Why, I'm throwing these starfish back into the ocean. You see, it's low tide right now and all of these starfish have been washed up onto the shore. If I don't throw them back into the sea, they'll die out here from lack of oxygen."

"Well, I can understand that. But there must be thousands of starfish on this beach. You can't possibly get to all of them. There are simply too many. And don't you realize this is happening on hundreds of beaches all up and down the coast. You can't possibly be making a difference?"

The local native smiled, bent down and picked up yet another starfish, and as he threw it back into the sea, he replied, “I made a difference to that one!”

We were challenged last week to take the Gospel values that are re-enforced in this place Sunday after Sunday – out to the many, many places we go in a given week and announce the kingdom of God is at hand – by our words and actions.

But, we may think, there are so many places and so many who are poor and homeless; sick and dying; needy and oppressed; or just the grumpy at Wal-Mart; how can what we do and say possibly make a difference?

Well, we aren’t asked to change the world all at one time, but we are called to make a difference in the world one person at a time.

When Jesus was asked by a scholar of the law, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

But there are so many neighbors. How can we possibly get started? Well, Jesus would say, “Why not start with the one in the ditch????”

It’s a familiar story, but let’s be certain it is our own story.

A man left for half-dead in the ditch. A priest happened to be going by, but he was too busy to stop – no doubt on his way to a very important meeting of some kind.

Then a Levite – a lawyer – came by and of course he would not get involved either, perhaps thinking he wouldn't do anything without first negotiating a fee or getting a waiver signed.

How often do we pass right by someone, without even acknowledging their presence, much less noticing they are in need in some way and then taking the time to respond to that need?

But then, in Jesus' story a Samaritan passes by. Who was moved with compassion, no doubt just one of many values he was carrying with him that day. And seeing that he could touch the world with those values by touching one person, he stopped and helped.

When Jesus tells this story – it is all the more pungent to his Jewish audience, because Samaritans stood outside the covenant relationship with God. They were envisioned by the Jews as the ones doing the violence to get the man in the ditch, not those moved with compassion to get the man out of the ditch. . .

And yet this one Samaritan makes a difference in one man's life and that stereotype of Samaritans being the "dogs of Judea" begins to breakdown. And the world becomes just a little better place.

That's the power of the values of the Kingdom of God being unleashed upon a needy world. And what we are called to do, one person at a time.

So, do take the time to smile at the grump at Wal-Mart.

Say something nice to that rude person at Home Depot.

Refuse to join in the heckling of a bad call at Little League.

Say something pleasant to the person working at the post office, at the paint store, at the Gladstone Community Center.

Take time to acknowledge the presence of the waitress at Agave, the teenager working the drive through at Dairy Queen or that slow cashier at Michael's.

But also don't forget to kiss your spouse – after both of you had hectic days. And be sure to make the time to tuck your kids into bed at night.

And the world **will** become just a little better place – one person at a time.