

“Doing the Impossible - Without Knowing It”

Dr. Robert Schuller of Crystal Cathedral fame, and known for his emphasis on positive thinking or possibility thinking as he calls it, tells about a man he met on a flight to Los Angeles. The man was a mathematician named George Dantzig. Schuller made the observation to Dantzig that this was the first time it had occurred to him that there was a field of endeavor to which positive thinking didn't apply. Mathematical problems have only one right answer, so they can't be affected in any way by how a person thinks. George Dantzig said Schuller was wrong.

Dantzig explained that during the Depression he had been a student of mathematics at the University of California-Berkeley. People were hungry and desperate for any job they could get. Dantzig, along with all his other classmates, desperately wanted the job of assistant teacher in the math department. Rumor had it that the person who scored the highest grade in a certain math course would get the job.

Dantzig worked unbelievably hard in this one class. He was determined to be the high scorer. But on the day of the final exam, George Dantzig overslept. He got to the exam late. The teacher handed Dantzig a piece of paper with eight math problems on it. Dantzig thought he could handle those eight problems just fine, but then he noticed two more problems on the board. He finished the eight problems in the time allotted, but asked the professor for extra time to finish the last two. The professor gave him an extension on his exam.

George Dantzig was convinced that he was as smart as anybody else in the class. And somebody in the class would figure out those two problems. He thought, why couldn't it be him? After all, the assistant teacher's job was riding on these two problems. So Dantzig labored over these problems all week, and finally solved them on Friday, just before his extension deadline.

A few days later, Dantzig was awakened by a pounding on his door. He opened it to find his professor overwhelmed with excitement. The professor asked George if he had come to class late on exam day. He admitted that he had. The professor explained that the exam had only consisted of the eight problems on the exam paper, which he had solved perfectly. The two problems on the board had been put up there for fun. They were classic mathematic problems that no mathematician had ever been able to solve. Even Einstein had been unable to crack them. The professor had explained at the beginning of class that these two problems had so far been unsolvable, but the students were welcome to play around with them. Because George Dantzig was late to class that day, he never heard that these problems were unsolvable, so he solved them. If he had known that Einstein couldn't solve them, he wouldn't have even

attempted them himself. But because no one had told him that it couldn't be done, he had done it!

I would bet that Jesus' disciples thought he was in over his head that day, when he set out to feed a multitude of 5,000 men and perhaps a greater number of women and children with only five loaves of bread and two fish. The disciples must have said to themselves, "It can't be done! It's Impossible!"

Charles F. Kettering was the Head of Research of General Motors. When he wanted a problem solved, Kettering would call together his engineering staff. However, he would first place a table outside the room where they would be meeting with a sign that read: "Leave your slide rules here." If he didn't do that, he says, he'd find someone reaching for his slide rule in the middle of the meeting. In a few minutes, this person would be on his feet saying, "Boss, you can't do that. It won't work!"

Isn't that true no matter what we try to accomplish in life? There is always someone saying, "You can't do it." "You can't lose that weight. You can't get that job. You can't make that marriage work. You can't really change." And because we listen to people who say it can't be done, we give up before victory is ours.

I don't usually share personal stories in sermons, but this one hit home. Now first I have to say, I loved my Mother dearly, but if I listened to her, you wouldn't have me playing the organ today. When I was 15 years old, the Episcopal Church around the corner from my house would allow me to practice the organ. At that point I didn't know how to play the organ. I did know how to play the piano, but I was curious about the organ, so they would allow me to go into the church during the week and play. I would simply hold down a chord and pull out different stops to hear what they sounded like. Then I would realize that this one and this one would sound good together. Through trial and error, I learned how to play the organ.

After several weeks of doing this, a friend called me and said their church organist resigned and they needed someone to play that Sunday. When I told my Mom, she said, "You can't do that. You've never done it before." Now being the typical teenager, I ignored my Mom and played the organ that Sunday. I must have done okay, because after the first Sunday they offered me the job. But in my head I kept hearing my mother's words, so my response was, "Oh no! I can't do that. I've never done it before." So as a compromise they asked if I would fill in until they got someone. So I filled in for 3 ½ years. But after a couple of months they finally convinced me to sign a contract. When I told my Mother that, at age 15, I signed a contract, "She gave me the typical, 'You can't do that, you've never done it before.'" My response was, "They think I can - so I am." There are always people who focus on what can't be done or what can't happen. There are always people who are predicting disaster.

When Lou Holtz, now the football coach at Notre Dame, led the University of Arkansas

into the 1978 Orange Bowl, he was warned that at the Orange Bowl, fans might throw oranges at his team. "It could be worse," said Holtz. "We could be going to the Gator Bowl." I like Holtz' attitude.

Dr. William H. Willimon tells of being in East Germany sometime back when his knowledgeable, university professor-type friends declared to him: "The Berlin wall will never come down, not in our lifetime." But two weeks later - it did!

We are getting ready to begin another Olympics this coming Friday. They are expecting swimmers to swim faster than any swimmer has ever swam before. High Jumpers will be jumping higher than was ever thought possible a few years ago. Rowers will row faster, Runners will run faster, Javelin throwers will throw farther, Weight Lifters will lift heavier weights. How is any of this possible? Because the athletes refuse to believe that they can't beat these records.

Jesus did something no one thought was possible. The disciples of Jesus were focusing on their problems - not on their possibilities. Jesus told them to give the crowd something to eat and they said, "We have here only five loaves and two fish." Did Jesus ask them what they had to work with? No! Did he ask them if any of them had any experience in the catering business? No! Jesus knew that no task undertaken at God's command is impossible. It doesn't matter how big or small that task may be.

If God tells us to go out and feed a hungry world - not only with physical bread but also with the bread of life which is the Word of God, is that impossible? No! If Christ tells us to make disciples of all people, is that impossible? No! If the Holy Spirit invades our fellowship and tells us there are things we can do to make this church a better church and this community a better community, is that impossible? No!

No task undertaken at God's command is impossible. Our God is a God of miracles. Our God can take a lump of coal and transform it into a diamond. Our God can take a lump of clay and fashion into a living human being. Nothing is impossible to God.

This past Tuesday evening there was a program about Randy Pausch. Some of you may have heard about this professor who was dying of cancer and gave his famous "Last Lecture." He died a week ago Friday. At the end of this program one of the family friends shared a conversation he had with Randy's oldest son - who I would guess is about 8 years old. When the son asked why his dad had to die, the family friend told him that sometimes cancer is something you can't beat. Randy's son said, "My Dad said there isn't anything you can't do."

You know - if we don't tell our kids "It can't be done" they will find a way to do it. Just perhaps this young son of Randy Pausch will be the one who finds a cure for Pancreatic Cancer.

Miracles can still happen! Jesus can feed 5000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish. Jesus can raise people from the dead. Jesus can Walk on water. Jesus can change water into wine. Jesus

can calm the seas. Jesus - can forgive our sins. We don't know how these miracles occurred, and it really doesn't matter. What difference does it make how God works? If God wants to miraculously multiply loaves and fish, that's wonderful. If God wants to open up people's hearts and cause them to share with one another, that's great, too. The point is, people were fed. Everyone had plenty to eat, and baskets full of food were left over.

People are quick to tell us - "That can't be done!" Jesus tells us it can! Who are we going to listen to? Amen!