

Pastoral Perspective

To keep our heads clear

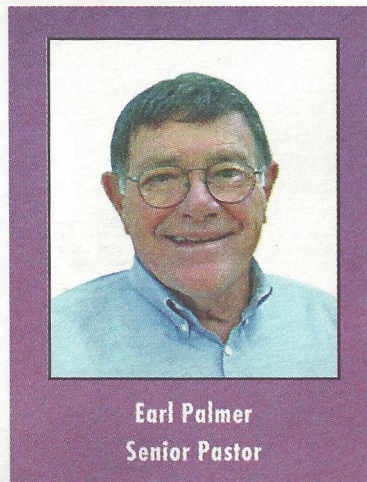
One of my favorite quotations is from the *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal: “Do great things as though they are small because of Jesus Christ. Do small things as though they are great because of Jesus Christ.” I actually carved this inscription on a piece of Puget Sound driftwood and it sits in my office at the church to help keep my head clear. This marker influences me in two ways: First, I am encouraged by what Pascal wrote as if it were for me; and secondly, the marker reminds me to be sure I read the book he wrote and other books, too, where I will find even more encouraging thoughts.

Pascal is saying that because of Jesus Christ the large matters of life can be handled incrementally, part by part, small step by small step, as though they were small when they are compared to the sheer size of the Lord of life and truth. This “because of Jesus Christ” discovery makes all the difference in charting the course of our lives throughout the whole journey. It teaches me to divide the large questions into their parts and take them on in single steps. It encourages me to take the time that it takes to share the gospel so that faithful, single steps add together

to become the larger whole.

This quote is also liberating and upgrades the daily ordinary encounters of life and living. It is an alert to us that the work crew at a church conference may, in fact, be the most important people at the conference from a strategy point of view. These creators of the small parts of the whole may be, in the end, the most decisive creators of healthy and lasting change. The ways that we as Christians treat the ones we work with has more permanent import for the kingdom than most of our larger statements of grand goals.

I wondered where Pascal came up with this thought and then I realized that he borrowed it from the final words of St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Paul thanked his friends at Philippi for their help to him while he was imprisoned in Rome. They had sent a young man named Epaphroditus to help him and when Epaphroditus became ill, Paul sent him home to Philippi with a truly remarkable letter. Listen to what he says when he thanks them: “[For] I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the



secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:11b-14)

Did you notice the great things, small things mixture? Paul is saying that on the one side, he can take in stride both abundance (great things) and want (small things), because of Jesus Christ, who is his friend, his Lord, his Savior and who is near by. (Philippians 4:5).

But Paul includes harsher contrasts too — to be *abased* in defeats and to be *honored* by success. He can take these large/small contrasts in stride. Paul tells us that he has learned the secret.

What is that secret? Paul has

learned how to make use of his *advantages* to the benefit of the ambassadorship mandate that he has joined. But he also makes use of his *disadvantages* too, even his persecutions, to the benefit of the same ambassadorship mandate. Can Paul’s secret become ours as well? What are your disadvantages and advantages? What are mine? For Paul there are several: his Roman citizenship helps him, his language skill results in brilliant and totally communicative letters, the wealth of his family and his family connections helped to rescue him from a gang of marauders who wanted to ambush him and kill him. (His sister was able to inform a Roman tribune at Jerusalem, who then rescued Paul from the gang of 40 plotters (Acts 23).) Also Paul has the ability to make friends. He was a likeable man who a Centurion named Julius respected so much that in a shipwreck near Malta he saved Paul’s life (Acts 27). Slaves and fellow prisoners and even guards called him their friend.

Paul also made use of his disadvantages. Imprisonments gave him the chance to write letters and share his faith with other prisoners and their guards, too (Philippians 1:13). At Ephesus he could only rent

Tyrannus Hall from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. each day, which seems unfortunate in the heat of the summers at Ephesus, but 3 to 5 happened to be the time slaves could get off work to come and hear Paul. Even this disadvantage became an asset for the ambassadorship of Paul.

I’ve been thinking about our own church here in Seattle and I believe the natural advantages have helped us, such as the location of our church building, across the street from a world-class university. But there have also been disadvantages that have made for wonderful surprises. The very size of our Sanctuary is limited to 1,200 people, which has required that we offer five worship services each Sunday. These have enabled our church to greatly expand ministry to children as well as the ministries of music, etc. The several times of worship each Sunday became the incentive for creative growth beyond every expectation. God has blessed us in the small and in the large. Has this been your story, too?

Let Blaise Pascal’s words ring in our ears: “Do great things as though they are small because of Jesus Christ. Do small things as though they are great because of Jesus Christ.”