

## PERSPECTIVE

Earl Palmer

**"L**et all people know your moderation. The Lord is nearby."

In Philippians 4:5 St. Paul seems to be sharing a secret formula for staying calm under pressure. Moderation characterizes an unflappable man or woman who keeps a clear head even when given reason to panic. Blaise Pascal further explained Paul's formula for me when he wrote, "Do great things as though they were small because of Jesus Christ, and do small things as though they were great because of Jesus Christ" (*Pensees*). Both men expressed how significant is the nearness of Jesus in any event of our lives.

Two challenges unnerve and rattle people. First of all, big issues of civilization make us feel inadequate and powerless—like I felt when I watched the fires and social upheaval in South Central Los Angeles following the Rodney King police brutality jury verdict. That shattering nighttime of terror was so intimidating and large scale that mere individuals or churches or communities felt too small to face the overwhelming extent of the crises.

### Why Should I Care?

The second unnerving challenge is just the opposite—the apparently unending details that clutter up every single day, so preoccupying us that we feel insignificantly busy with irrelevance. Take last year's congressional bank account overdrafts and check-kiting stories. I couldn't rate their abuses as earth-shakingly important in the whole scheme of things, yet I gave so much of my attention to it that I became irritated with myself.

Small matters in our everyday jobs, our family life, and our church endeavors sap our attention out of

proportion to their importance. We repair broken things, recycle plastic bottles, sort papers, arrange schedules, work on committees. Tending to tiny aspects of some vague larger whole nibbles away at us, and we often feel we are persevering in tasks of little permanent consequence given our life goals.

Pascal solved both of these challenges by urging that we attend to the great and small in our lives because of Jesus Christ. In Paul's words, "Remember, the Lord is nearby." Jesus Christ, and he alone, outweighs every crisis of civilization, scaling

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Jesus modeled how to work at vast problems—one person at a time, one place at a time, one moment at a time. Because of him we know there is some one thing for us to do that will begin to care for the heartbreak caused by war, racism, and the residue of ancient hatreds. We can do something because of the sure strategy of hope in Jesus Christ that works at the large issues in particular parts, places, and times. This strategy refuses to be intimidated by size, wagering on the efficacy of the contagious impact of small-scale models of love, faith, and hope.

I saw the strategy in action when two Seattle congregations of Christians, one a predominantly African American church and the other a predominantly white church, together sent a team of nineteen adults to work alongside East Los Angeles con-

gregations of Christians in helping to serve people who were devastated by the L.A. fires. However basic their assistance, this concrete and decidedly smallscale response brought helpful good will into a bitter and smoldering place. This is how the world is changed.

### A CPA for the Hungry

I know of a young woman who received her education and qualified herself as a CPA. She entered into professional life in public accounting but was of a mind to keep her skills growing, so she decided to learn Portuguese. In one Sunday mor-

ning bulletin she saw a one-line notice: "Wanted: a person with accounting skills to serve a Christian agency as comptroller in Mozambique." Three years later Barbara Kuyper is in Mozambique as comptroller for Food for the Hungry. At the same time, in this poorest of all countries in the world, she has

become involved in a Christian ministry to street children. Pascal would have liked Barbara Kuyper.

What about the details, though—the endless small matters that use up so much time, yet cannot be disregarded? Pascal says that because of Jesus Christ we can upgrade all routine moments of our lives. Those who follow well that advice will find they view their activities as significant rather than as busy work.

I stumbled on that experience in my family. The best chances I had to really get to know our three children, I discovered, were during ordinary stretches of time we spent driving or walking to places they had to go. When I look back I recognize that during the unplanned, routine moments the best breakthroughs hap-

pened, real communication took place. Sometimes the most fun happened when we simply had to stop off for ice cream. Our Lord's deepest conversation with Peter happened at just such a small-scale, servant moment when Jesus washed the disciples' feet.

My advice to adults who want to have a ministry among youths is this: be as available as you can at all of the routine times. Volunteer to help out with school clean-up, to drive for games or trips, to prepare food. Let kids know that you enjoy them for who they are by showing your enjoyment in the ordinary places where they are. Being together during the mundane moments enriches your experiences of the grand ceremonial

moments like weddings, graduations, and other formal occasions.

The only way that either Pascal's or Paul's advice will work is if we are close to Jesus Christ and trust him to be near to us. He is near whether we trust him or not; but when we do trust him, the panic more quickly gives way to peace.

Christians are not called to be heroic, if by that we mean brave and daring folk who have more courage than ordinary people. We are called to be something better than heroic—and something more possible, too. We are called to stay close to Jesus Christ and to recognize that he is the hero. He is the brave one who dared the dragon into battle, therefore he has the last word. He has the power

to heal and change hopeless situations. Knowing this alone enables a Christian to stay in close to where the needs are and to "do great things as though they were small because of Jesus Christ, and do small things as though they were great because of Jesus Christ."♦



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*"Hurry up, Edna! Just see what stations her buttons are set to, and let's leave."*

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