

'Heart Lady' Uses Art to Spread a Little Love Around

In the News

"Because I've been weak, I'm strong. Because I've had pain, I know joy. Wherever you are in your process of life, I hope you know the strength and joy will return to you. I love you always." This message appeared last Sunday on artist Deirdre Freeman's Facebook page, next to her colorful painting with the word "Joy" in red cursive letters and white hearts with red polka dots.

An article about Freeman and her work appeared in an Associated Press article in late April.

Freeman, 50, began posting vibrant painted paper hearts with messages of love and encouragement on trees and telephone poles in Alameda, California, two years ago. She calls it her "Heart Work" project. Some of her 6,500 heart creations have remained in place for months, while others show up in the homes of locals and foreigners, as far away as Europe and Asia.

She posts photos of her art on her Facebook page with the caption, "For the poles." It's not clear whether she is referring only to the location of many of her paintings or also to her hope that her art might bring people together in what seems to be an increasingly polarized world.

Nicknamed "the heart lady" by residents, the mother of two calls her work "a labor of love." Once a speech pathologist, Freeman left that profession 12 years ago to devote herself full time to creating art to bring joy, comfort and assurance of human worth. She finds fulfillment in knowing that she can lift spirits and make a difference in someone's day, simply by using her talent with a bit of acrylic paint and a brush. A boy told his mother that Freeman's paintings made him feel safe in the neighborhood, and a man shared that her artwork rescued him from suicidal thoughts.

To some viewers, Freeman's art is reminiscent of doodles from the "flower child" era of the 1960s and '70s, but Freeman doesn't like to be typecast. However people describe her art, she says this is her goal: "I want to put beauty out there in the hope that my emotions, my joy, that emanate from it, will one day change the world -- if only shining pieces of it."

The artist paints images of earth and sky: flowers, trees, swirling waves, trails, mountains, rainbows, sun, moon and stars; various figures, human and otherwise, including fairies, angels, mermaids, mother and child, butterflies, dragonflies, fish, birds, elephants; geometric shapes, musical instruments such as a harp or a piano, balloons, bicycles, a sailboat, hearts (even a bouquet of hearts), peace symbols, and more.

During the pandemic, another artist, Kristina Libby, started the Floral Heart Project in New York City. She created large floral heart wreaths, placing them around the city to give the community

public memorials where people could grieve their losses, pray and perhaps find some measure of healing.

"I would watch people sort of kiss their fingers and then kiss the heart," Libby said.

With the help of donations from florists and others, Libby mobilized volunteers to lay more floral hearts in 75 locations across the country to honor the memory of victims of Covid-19.

Sometimes Freeman paints words or short messages on her heartworks, such as "Abolish prejudice. We are one," "Miracles abound," "Love is the undercurrent," "Love is a magnet," "Love will overcome," "That smile looks WOW on you," "Focus on goodness," "Dare to soar," "Fly free, friends," and "You have changed the world simply by having been born."

Occasionally, the words are hidden. When someone asks if they are really seeing a secret message in one of her paintings, Freeman responds that only "special people" can see it. The unspoken idea is that love is everywhere, but sometimes you have to search for it. To encourage the search for authentic, caring connections, Freeman sometimes pins up one of her heartworks in an obscure location, with the message that she'll take the first person who finds it to lunch.

Art, for Freeman, is about more than sharing her talent; it is about building relationships between the artist and the viewer, and perhaps even inspiring viewers to create art of their own. A poster (presumably created by a local child) featuring hearts, stars, smiley faces and the words "Be awesome! Love!" once appeared beneath one of Freeman's paintings on a telephone pole.

Her reaction? She was delighted. "Love multiplies!" she said. "It's magic!"

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Bay Area Artist Spreads Love, Smiles Through Her 'Heartwork.'](#) *Associated Press*
[Deirdre Freeman: ARTIST and ENIGMATIC LOVE WARRIOR](#)
[@justblissingaround. Facebook](#)
[Floral Hearts Comfort Grieving Families of Pandemic Dead.](#) *Associated Press*

The Big Questions

1. What is the impact of small gestures done by others in your life?
2. Have you ever wondered whether you have the "skill set" or "the right stuff" needed to serve God effectively? What constitutes "the right stuff"?
3. How are we changed as individuals when we use our talents for the benefit of others, expecting nothing in return?
4. When, if ever, have you seen God use a person whose gifts were not particularly remarkable to accomplish amazing things? What does that suggest about how God works?

5. How can we be more intentional about using our talents to spread the message of the gospel?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Zechariah 4:8-10

Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel." (For context, read 4:1-10.)

An angel spoke to the prophet Zechariah, to explain a vision that concerned Zerubbabel, the civic leader of Jerusalem, who was to finish rebuilding the temple. The work had stalled, and Zechariah received a word of encouragement for Zerubbabel.

First, God makes it clear that the work would be finished not by human ingenuity, cleverness or might, but by the work of God's Spirit (v. 6). That Spirit was the same one that transformed chaos and darkness into the order, beauty and light of creation (Genesis 1:2), the same Spirit that opened and closed the Red Sea (Exodus 15:8, 10), that gave life to dead bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14). Surely that Spirit could handle a little project like rebuilding the temple, even if that seemed like an immovable mountain to Zerubbabel! By God's grace, a house of worship would rise from the rubble (v. 7).

Zerubbabel wasn't getting any younger, and he may well have wondered whether he would die before finishing the work. The work of rebuilding the temple had been delayed almost 20 years. What did God mean by "the day of small things"? But God doesn't measure time the way we do. Peter wrote that "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day" (2 Peter 3:8).

God assured him that just as Zerubbabel had begun the work, he would be the one to complete it, with the resources God would provide. Zerubbabel would hold the plummet or plumb line (a measuring tool of construction) in his hand.

So Zerubbabel was not to despise the years of small things, but reckon that from God's perspective, time was irrelevant. It is in such seasons of small things that God shapes and prepares people for glory, so we should accept them.

Preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) wrote that "God accepts your little works if they are done in faith in his dear Son. God will give success to your little works: God will educate you by your little works to do greater works; and your little works may call out others who shall do greater works by far than ever you shall be able to accomplish."

Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe (1929-2019) agrees: "Bible history is the record of God using small things. ... Never despise the day of small things, for God is glorified in small things and uses them to accomplish great things."

Questions: When, if ever, have you lived through "days of small things"? How did you handle that experience? If you went through another season of small things now, what lessons from previous "days of small things" would you want to remember to help you cope?

Luke 16:10

[Jesus said,] "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. (For context, read 16:1-13.)

Matthew 25:21

[Jesus said,] "His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' (For context, read 25:14-30.)

Jesus told various parables to illustrate the principle that we build character and effective ministry on small things. We also destroy character and effective ministry when we are unfaithful in small things. You know the old saying, attributed to Benjamin Franklin:

*For the want of a nail the shoe was lost,
For the want of a shoe the horse was lost,
For the want of a horse the rider was lost,
For the want of a rider the battle was lost,
For the want of a battle the kingdom was lost,
And all for the want of a horseshoe-nail.*

We must be true to the many small, mundane duties that are close at hand, if we hope to be given greater responsibilities in God's kingdom. We can't wait to serve the Lord until we can do some deed of greatness. Instead, we must serve God now, in the smallest way.

Questions: Why might we be tempted to ignore or "despise" small duties?

What "small things" has God entrusted to your care? How can you hold yourself accountable to fulfill your responsibilities in these "small" areas?

Matthew 10:42

[Jesus said,] ... and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple -- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward. (For context, read 10:40-42.)

Jesus taught his disciples that the smallest kind gesture, such as giving a cup of cold water to someone who is thirsty, will be rewarded. The preceding verses explain why. Whoever welcomes one of Jesus' disciples is welcoming Jesus, which is tantamount to welcoming the one who sent Jesus, God himself!

This principle correlates perfectly with Jesus' statement in Matthew 25:40, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." In that chapter, Jesus says that when we feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, take care of the sick and visit the prisoner, it is the same as caring

for Jesus himself. We may think those small gestures don't amount to much, but that's not how Jesus sees it!

Questions: How easy is it to see Jesus in the face of other people? How easy is it to see God in a visitor, a migrant or refugee, a person who is in a thrift store or a bread line, in the hospital or in jail? What spiritual disciplines might you employ to help you see Jesus and God in people like this? How might seeing Jesus and God in them further shape or change your approach to those individuals?

John 6:9-11

[Andrew said,] "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. (For context, read 6:1-14.)

Shortly before the Passover festival was to begin, crowds of people were following Jesus, because he was healing many sick people (vv. 1-4). Jesus put the question to his disciples about how such a multitude should be fed (vv. 5-6). Philip replied that even if they had six months' wages, it wouldn't be enough to give each person even a little bit of bread (v. 7).

Then Andrew piped up that there was a boy who had five barley rolls and two fish. He didn't see how the little bit of bread and fish they *did* have would be any more help than the six months' wages they *didn't* have.

But even though Andrew couldn't imagine how the boy's lunch could be of any help, he brought it to Jesus anyway. We are mindful that Jesus commended the widow who put two small copper coins (worth a penny) into the offering plate. "[S]he out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on," Jesus said (Mark 12:41-44). The boy exhibited the same kind of generosity, even though he may well have had to skip a meal. Like the widow, he also had to trust in God to meet his needs.

Questions: What did the disciples lack? What did they have?

How often have you heard or said words to the effect, "We have these paltry resources, limited talents, and we are few in number and small in strength. But what are they among so many people with so many needs, great and small?" How can you move from a zero sum approach that sees only what you don't have, which is never enough, to a vision of what you do have, which will always be more than enough?

How can you nurture a spirit of expectancy, such as Jesus created when he invited the people to sit down?

How willing are you to give God everything you have? Is it easier to give when you have an abundant surplus, or when you have next to nothing? When your gift doesn't seem like it can

make much of a difference, or when it might be more than adequate to meet the current need? Explain your answer.

For Further Discussion

1. Brother Lawrence (c. 1611–1691) was a lay French Carmelite monk who is known for "practicing the presence of God" in the mundane tasks of life, such as cooking and washing dishes.

In "[Brother Lawrence on Prayer and Doing the Dishes](#)," a blogger writes: "We are not jumping from 'spiritual' things to 'nonspiritual' things. And prayer is of no more worth than taking out the garbage if it is not done toward God rather than ourselves. Said positively, the disciplines are whatever practices lead us toward God and away from ourselves. That is what is remarkable about the title of Brother Lawrence's book [*The Practice of the Presence of God*, aka *Practicing the Presence of God*]; you open it expecting to read all about prayer, solitude, fasting, etc. Instead you read about doing the dishes. He gets us away from looking at our outward actions and points us to the heart. You don't do spiritual things, you are spirit-filled or you are not."

Consider these nuggets from the pen of Brother Lawrence himself:

- Nor is it needful that we should have great things to do ... We can do little things for GOD; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of Him, and that done, if there is nothing else to call me, I prostrate myself in worship before him, who has given me grace to work; afterwards I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God.
- Our sanctification does not depend as much on changing our activities as it does on doing them for God rather than for ourselves.
- We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed.
- ... to do everything for the love of God, to make use of all the labors of one's state in life to show him that love, and to maintain his presence within us by this communion of our hearts with his ... There is no finesse about it; one has only to do it generously and simply.

How do you serve God in ordinary tasks that don't feel particularly "religious" in nature?

2. In the 1928 book, *The Law of Success in Sixteen Lessons*, Napoleon Hill wrote, "If you cannot do great things yourself, remember that you may do small things in a great way."

TWW team member Mary Sells suggested, "Perhaps we would do more little things for others if we realize that every little drop of sunshine makes for a brighter day; we don't have to be the sun, just a little ray of light."

We could add, if not a little ray of light, perhaps we could be a mirror reflecting the sun, or a candle that accepts a flame from another.

How might the metaphors of a sun ray, a mirror or a candle help shape your understanding of your symbiotic relationship with God and how you can work together with God to shine light in dark places?

3. "You know well enough that Our Lord does not look so much at the greatness of our actions, nor even at their difficulty, but at the love with which we do them," wrote Carmelite nun St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who taught the "Little Way" to become a saint: "To do small things with great love."

"It's not the big things that make us saints; it's the little things every day," declared Audrey Ahern, a West Virginia University alumna who starred in "Therese: The Story of a Soul," a play about St. Thérèse of Lisieux, in 2015 at St. John's University Parish Center in Morgantown, West Virginia.

"Everyone is called to become more like a saint -- more like St. Therese -- and do everyday things with as much love as possible; recognize your weaknesses and give them to God; and recognize your strengths and thank God for them," Ahern said.

As St. Thérèse (The Little Flower) would say, "A word or a smile is often enough to put fresh life in a despondent soul."

When, if ever, has someone done some small thing with great love for you? How did that impact you?

4. John Chapman (1774-1845), a Swedenborgian missionary, is best known for creating apple trees nurseries in Ontario, Canada, and five northeastern states of America. We know him by the nickname, "Johnny Appleseed." Native Americans regarded him as someone who had been touched by the Great Spirit. Today, it's doubtful that many people could tell you what John Chapman preached, but most schoolchildren could tell you what he did as a horticulturist.

What does this suggest about the importance of different callings and the value of various gifts and talents, be they "religious" or "secular" in nature?

5. Ina Mae Duley Ogdon was a talented musician and poet who hoped to preach on the [Chautauqua](#) speaker circuit. Her dream was cut short when her father became an invalid, requiring her care. She wrote the lyrics to "Brighten the Corner Where You Are" to cheer him with the thought that he could still serve God, whatever his circumstances. See more on her story [here](#). Here are the lyrics, in part:

Do not wait until some deed of greatness you may do,
Do not wait to shed your light afar,
To the many duties ever near you now be true,
Brighten the corner where you are.
Just above are clouded skies that you may help to clear,
Let not narrow self your way debar;
Though into one heart alone may fall your song of cheer,
Brighten the corner where you are.
Here for all your talent you may surely find a need,
Here reflect the bright and Morning Star;
Even from your humble hand the Bread of Life may feed,
Brighten the corner where you are.
Brighten the corner where you are!
Brighten the corner where you are!
Someone far from harbor you may guide across the bar;
Brighten the corner where you are!

It turns out that Ogdon's personal text, paired with a cheery tune written by Charles Gabriel, had an outsized influence in American religion and culture. It was used in the Judy Garland movie, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and popular evangelist, Billy Sunday, regularly featured the song in his meetings.

One day, the CEO of a national business, who cared only for money, found himself stuck with a flat tire in front of the Billy Sunday Tabernacle. While his chauffeur worked on the problem, the businessman got bored, and eventually joined the crowds flocking into the building. There he heard a message that changed him forever, and he joined the converts at the front of the auditorium.

"I don't suppose ... you can realize how I could have become so cold and indifferent to everyone and everything in the world as I have become," he told the counselor who met him there. "I taught myself to look on those around me as so many shadows out of which I could extract what I wanted. ... I don't think I ever loved a person in my life.

"I listened, tonight, for the first time, to men talking about the things I have always refused to consider -- God and Humanity," he added. "Then came that song, 'Brighten the Corner,' and in its simple melody and message I heard something that finished my decision. I'm going to begin the job of brightening the corner on business lines!"

TWW team member Bill Tammeus commented: "When I was a kid in Sunday school, one of the songs we sang almost every Sunday was '[Brighten the Corner Where You Are.](#)' The artist in the news is doing that. Are we?"

Another TWW team member, Liz Antonson, responded: "I was a grumpy teenager and my grandmother kept encouraging me to stop with the pity party and start doing kind things for others. She was right. I did not know that complaining about everything was so damaging to my mood until, at her urging, I started doing kind things for others. Later, a Salvation Army captain signed my Bible with this advice: 'When your lot in life is small, build a service station on it.'"

When, if ever, have you found yourself on a small patch of "land," sidelined, perhaps, from any major opportunities to serve God the way you would like to? How did God use that time to shape you into a more faithful disciple of Christ and clearer reflection of his character? How did you "brighten the corner where you were"? How can you do that now?

6. Freelance writer Robert Brault said, "Enjoy the little things, for one day you may look back and realize they were the big things." What are some "little things" that you didn't necessarily appreciate at the time, that you now realize were really important in your life?

Responding to the News

In small groups, identify some little talent or gift each person has that could be used or that is being used to bring God glory and to bless others. Then thank God for each person and commit what they have to offer to God.

Prayer offered by Anonymous

O God,
I thank you for a daily task to do,
For books that are my ships with golden wings.
For mighty gifts let others offer praise --

Lord, I am thanking you for little things.
Amen.