

The Greatness of Small Things

By

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Psalm 138

¹I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; ²I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything. ³On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul. ⁴All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth. ⁵They shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD. ⁶For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away. ⁷Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. ⁸The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Mark 12:38-44

³⁸As he taught, Jesus said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” ⁴¹Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

Just when you thought Stewardship Season was over, having run its course during the month of October and two weeks after we dedicated our pledges for the coming year, the Common Lectionary dishes up the Widow's Mite! It's the all-time great paradigm of Christian giving, the story of the poor woman who gave everything she had. What the rich young ruler could not do, she did without even being asked. As another preacher put it, "It was as easy as uncurling her fingers from around two copper coins and letting them fall into the temple treasury, still damp from her hands, where they made such a small sound that only she could hear it. As far as she knew, no one even saw her. But then again, no one ever saw her. She was one of life's minor characters, one of the invisible people who come and go without anyone noticing what they do. She was a bit player, one of the extras who ring the stage while the major characters stride around the middle, dazzling everyone with their costumes and high drama."¹ And yet, Jesus pointed her out as an example of faithfulness and generosity.

I've preached at least a dozen stewardship sermons on this text, inviting the congregation to sit next to Jesus when he calls his disciples over and says, *Look at her. She has given everything she has... can't you give just a little more than what you currently give? Like the poor woman in the Temple, can't you see that by the regular worship of God we discover everything we have of value is a gift from God. So to God we return the treasure of our lives.* You've heard that Widow's Mite sermon before, so today I don't need to preach that sermon.

Besides there is another message at the core of this text, a message we miss when we squeeze the stewardship juice out of it and throw the rind away. This familiar story is even more profound than putting all your money - down to the last dime - in the offering plate. Jesus is calling us to hear a larger truth, and it's a timely word this Sunday after the national election. We have spent months watching the rich and the powerful taking the stage in political arenas in their fancy clothes,

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, 25th Sunday after Pentecost, All Saints Episcopal, Atlanta.

expecting - like the scribes – to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the house and places of honor at banquets! Whether you are satisfied with this week’s election outcomes or you are traumatized by the thought of another Trump presidency, Jesus is taking us all to the heart of the gospel. He is directing our gaze to see the coming reign of God is driven by people with unknown names, whose contributions seem insignificant, and whose words and deeds appear minuscule. Here, as is often the case in the stories about Jesus, the gospel is revealed by an unnamed woman doing something very small. And yet, her tiny act of generosity is the focus of Jesus’ lesson for the disciples, when otherwise they might have been swooning over the finery of the scribes.

Jesus is drawing a stark contrast between the rich and the poor; the people in power and the most vulnerable; the pompous know-it-alls who circle the temple in their long robes attracting the respect of the crowds, and the otherwise invisible human being at the lowest rung of the ladder. Jesus is drawing a stark contrast between the presumed faithful who wear their religion on their sleeves, praying long prayers out loud to prove their piety, when under it all is vapid, vain worship, over against an act of devotion so small no one notices, no one notices but Jesus himself. These religious leaders trot around seeking power and authority and wealth by devouring widow’s houses, according to Jesus, and it is the poor woman with two copper coins who shows us how to live a Godly life with extravagant generosity. She has no intention of being seen. And yet, her small gesture is the stuff of greatness.

Think about it. Jesus repeatedly points to the minor characters and small acts of sharing to talk about greatness. There’s the little boy who had but a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. His measly offering fed a multitude. Or the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet with no cloth but her hair. By this small, intimate act, Jesus said, she has performed a great service for me. Or those few nameless men who teamed up and lowered their paralyzed friend through the roof to be healed. Or Jairus’ little girl who was so far gone the funeral mourners had arrived, when Jesus tells

her to get up and have something to eat. In Mark's gospel that nameless girl is the one whose life snatched from the grip of death points us toward Jesus' own resurrection. Wherever you look for examples of greatness in the gospel they are found in the smallest lives of minor characters, in the actions of marginalized, vulnerable people. Children, the blind, the sick and half dead, a tiny little tax collector up a tree, a poor widow unfurling her fingers from around two copper coins.

Perhaps now is the moment to turn our attention away from those who take center stage, and remember the life of faith, according to Jesus, is about the small, daily things we can do to help pave the way for peace, to work for justice in our community, to be kind, compassionate neighbors, and in so doing help reconcile the world to God. According to the gospel, it's the smallest of actions, day in and day out, that add up to a life of faithfulness, and matter to God in the long run.

Fred Craddock, professor of homiletics and extraordinary preacher himself, cautioned his seminary students not to overload their sermons with too many larger-than-life examples of faithful bravado. He once asked, "Have you ever listened to a sermon in which the lineup of illustrations were Albert Schweitzer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, and missionaries who had their feet frozen off in the tundra up north?" And then, he movingly related that lesson for his student preachers to his own experience of his call as a teenager to the Christian faith. Fred Craddock recounted, "As a young person sitting in the church listening to those stories... I just sat there... and said to myself, *It's a shame you can't be a Christian in this little town. Nobody is chasing or imprisoning or killing Christians!*

Fred went away to summer camp. One inspiring night they stood around the lake and held candles and sang, "Are Ye Able?" As a youth, beginning to feel called more deeply to Christian discipleship, Fred went back to his bunk and said to God, "Yes, I am able." "Are you able to give your life?" he wondered. "I'll give my life," Fred promised - and he pictured himself running in front of a train to rescue a child, swimming

out and saving someone who was drowning.” “I imagined myself,” he went on, “against a gray wall and some soldier saying, ‘One last chance to deny Christ and live.’ I confessed my faith, and they said, ‘Ready, aim, fire.’” The body slumped, the flag at half mast, widows were weeping in the afternoon. Later a monument is built, and people come with their cameras. “Johnny, you stand over there where Fred gave his life. Let’s get your picture.” “I was sincere then,” Craddock said, “as I have been these fifty years since. ‘I give my life,’ but nobody warned me that I could not write one big check. I’ve had to write fifty years of little checks: 87 cents, 21 cents, a dollar three cents.” Small gifts of caring, little acts of boldness, daily tasks of faithfulness “just nibbled away at giving this life.”²

This week, if you are feeling overwhelmed and despondent by the results of the election, or if you are feeling satisfied and relieved, we all know there is a lot of uncertainty about how the coming months and years will unfold. But, remember, none of us is being called to complacency as if all the action takes place center stage with high drama. None of us is without human agency to participate in God’s greatness by doing small things.

Pastor and writer, Rachel Held Evans, wrote about the greatness of small things by connecting our life of worship with our living the faith from day to day. She wrote, “The hands that pass the peace can pass a meal to the man on the street. The hands that take the tiny morsel of bread to receive communion with Christ will extend to receive Christ in the immigrant, the refugee, the lonely, the sick.” Our small hands are instruments of great acts. “Hands plant, and uproot, and cook, and caress. They repair, and rewire and change diapers, and dress wounds, and swing hammers to build shelter for the unhoused. Hands wipe away tears and rub the bellies of dogs.” If you want to be engaged in the greatness of God’s work in the world, start small. She concluded,

² Fred B. Craddock; Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, editors, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), 155.

“Sanctify all sorts of ordinary things and make them holy. Through human touch, God gave us the power to injure or to heal, to wage war or wash feet.”³ We get to choose.

Friends, let us not forget the gravity or the greatness of small things. According to Jesus, two copper coins from the hand of the poorest, most vulnerable soul in the world, are measured as greatness in the realm of God. He is saying to us, turn your gaze away from the leu of the rich and powerful, and model your life after hers. By her smallest of gifts, she has given *everything* – everything she has to live on – she gave to God.

AMEN.

³ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*.