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November 23, 2008
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The Power of Small Things
Proverbs 30: 18-19; Exodus 3: 2-6

I was talking to my son Stewart a few weeks into his first semester at college, and I could tell the “adjustment blues” had begun to sink in, as they generally do in that initial period away from all that is familiar. But he was coping. He said, “Dad, I’ve made some good friends, and we’ve learned to create little moments of celebration. Wednesday is barbecue sandwich night – and they have pretty good barbecue sandwiches at East Carolina. And some Thursdays are ‘steak night,’ and we’ve learned to turn those into a celebration, too.” Then he made this startlingly wise observation: “You know, Dad, if you don’t learn to celebrate the small things in life, you’ll go crazy here.” I replied, “Son, if you don’t learn to celebrate the small things in life, you’ll go crazy anywhere.”

How vividly this point was brought home to me some years ago, when I was driving on a city street on a sunny, autumnal, windy day. I was stopped at a traffic light and happened to glance at an old man on the sidewalk. His face was uplifted toward the slanting sun in a countenance I can only describe as “rapturous.” He appeared to be drinking in sunlight, relishing the bite of the breeze, enjoying the dance of the leaves. Though he was on an ordinary sidewalk in the midst of an ordinary day, he appeared to be attending a festival. He was soaking up the confluence of small things. The light changed, I moved on. But throughout the rest of the day I carried with me the strong impression that that old man had been perceiving a dimension of beauty, wonder and richness that I could not detect. He was attentive to a reality hidden in small things.

In the popular book of a decade ago, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, a non-fiction account of a renowned sportswriter’s relationship with a old professor dying from Lou Gehrig’s disease, Morrie, the old man, nodded out a window one morning and said to his sportswriter friend, “You see that window? You can go outside there anytime. You can run up and down the block and go crazy. I can’t do that. I can’t run. I can’t go out. But you know what? I *appreciate* that window more than you do.” The sportswriter responded, “Appreciate it?” “Yes,” the old man replied, “I look out that window everyday. I notice change in the trees, how strong the wind is blowing. It is as if I can see time passing through that window-pane. Because I know my time is almost done, I am drawn to nature like I’m seeing it for the first time.” This dying professor had come to realize that all of life passes and proceeds in a series of small acts, insignificant moments that turn out, as we take our leave of them, to not be so small after all. An ordinary window gave a dying man the venue he needed to view the world and know exactly what W. H. Auden meant when he wrote, “Miracle is the only thing that happens.”

Have you ever said a common, ordinary word like, say, “cantaloupe,” and suddenly, it was if you had heard it for the first time? You repeat the word “cantaloupe,” aloud and you find yourself saying, ‘What an odd word!’

You've been saying the word all your life, but suddenly it sounds different to you than it ever has before. You begin to wonder, how many other ordinary words would sound strange to me if only my ears were open to hear them, if only my eyes were open to see them? The Proverbist has ears and eyes that are open. He has been noticing small things, and the more he has observed these small things, the more he has been moved to awed expression. He writes to call our attention to the power of small things, saying:
Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand:
The way of an eagle in the sky,
The way of a serpent on a rock,
The way of a ship on the high seas,
The way of a man with a maiden.

These are, at one level, mundane actions. Everyone has seen gliding birds and slithering snakes, the marvel of a heavy ship upheld by liquid -- but have we seen them with fresh eyes? A young man flirts with a young maiden in a dance of testing and teasing that has transpired a million times. Yet every time it happens is unique and fascinating and exasperating in its own way. How extraordinary is the fact that this dance of teasing and testing carries the potential to evolve into a love that is stronger than death, a love capable of creating a household, a family, a story that enriches the earth! Common things are not common!
The small things of life burst with meaning.
The more the Proverbist examines and explores small things the more he senses that he does not understand. In fact, the Proverbist knows he *cannot* understand -- not fully. Because the more you study something, the more its intricacy becomes clear to you, even in a small thing. The more you know, the more you know you do not know -- yet the more alive your senses are. It is the majority of us who look at small things and think we see them in full who truly live blind.

The great writer Franz Kafka once said to a friend about another friend,
“{He} maintains that I smuggle miracles into ordinary events. Of course that is a serious mistake on his part. Ordinary events are a miracle in themselves. I only write them down. Maybe I illuminate things, too, like a projectionist on a half-darkened stage. But that's not right either. In reality the stage isn't dark at all. It's full of light. That's why people close their eyes and see so little.”

Most people think of faith as an act of hope that allows them to believe in things that are not there. That is exactly wrong!

Faith is that power that allows us to see realities that have always been there!

Faith allows us to see realities to which most people are oblivious.

Faith is meant to give us the vision to see the wondrous divine imprint upon the smallest act.

Faith is intended to provide a window into viewing the element of the miraculous that lies at the heart of small, common, quotidian events in life.

That's why the great Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard often said such harsh things about Christians. He noted that most Christians perform a wondrous and terrible miracle.

Jesus turned water into wine, noted Kierkegaard,

but Christians have done something far more wondrous and terrible: *we have turned wine into water.*

We have been given a gift that is extraordinary in its depth, wondrous in its nature, exciting in its character, yet we have turned it into something bland, stale, habituated, insipid, boring and lifeless.

Faith is meant to give us resurrection eyes that allow us to sense the presence of the miraculous that is happening all around us -- the miraculous that is meant to be happening within us!

What does Paul say? If anyone is in Christ, he or she is being made a new creature.

We are to be conscious of living the miracle of being made a new creature.
But it takes eyes to appreciate the wonder of this process.

How is it that we tend only to appreciate things through the losing of them?

I remember paying a hospital visit to Zoltan Szabo, the great artist in our congregation,
who has now gone to be with the Lord.

Zoltan had a painter's highly-developed eye for appreciating small details.

I happened to be visiting him in the wake of his experiencing a total hip replacement.

He was sitting up bed, trying to wiggle his toes. "Zoltan what in the world are you doing?" I asked.

He said, "I will never take again for granted the joy of wiggling my toes.

I never thought of wiggling my toes as anything special. But after surgery, being asked to wiggle my toes
and not being able to do it has impressed upon me that wiggling one's toes is a wondrous thing."

Well, it is a wondrous thing. But what if we were able to appreciate wiggling our toes
without first having to lose the capacity to wiggle our toes?

Curiosity about odd and small things can be the gateway to opening our relationship with the divine.

I think of the call of Moses. He was doing something purely mundane, taking his sheep out to graze.

The Bible says that an angel called to him out of a burning bush – but that's not exactly right.

In truth, Moses was out at the mountain doing something ordinary on an ordinary day,

when suddenly he saw a burning bush and said to himself, "That's odd," and he drew near.

It is only when he evinced curiosity about this oddity that God said, 'Now he is ready for my call.'

Only then did voice call out of the burning bush, "Moses, take off our shoes, you are on holy ground."

Any ground can be holy ground if only we are sufficiently curious!

What kind of curiosity about your world might cause you to see more powerfully the imprint of God upon
your existence?

What curiosity might inspire you to turn your faith from something dull, boring and insipid into something
lively, challenging and exciting?

What curiosity about some small thing might cause you to splice your life into a community of faith?

What curiosity might inspire you to invest yourself in God's kingdom with the whole of your being?

Children know what I'm talking about.

They sense the relationship between the mundane and the miraculous. In C. S. Lewis' stories,

children push through an ordinary wardrobe and find themselves in an alternative universe.

They stare at an ordinary picture only to fall through it and find themselves sailing on the high seas.

All of life is holy ground. Any small thing can be a doorway into contact with the transcendent.

Yet how many of us view the gift of life with dull eyes?

That is why Christ tells us that we must become like a child in order to enter the Kingdom of God!

Whitaker Chambers, one of the most fascinating creatures of the twentieth century,

began his career as a communist and avowed atheist.

He began to lose his faith in atheism the day he beheld the curvature of his infant daughter's ear.

Her ear was just a small thing.

But the wonder of the biological engineering, the delicacy of the membranes, the functional symmetry
of the tissue spoke to him of a divine intelligence whose reality could not be denied.

He wondered, 'How could I have been so blind to the presence of divine miracle before?'

The Proverbist is not blind. Rather, he looks upon simple things, a gliding eagle, a slithering snake,
a bouncing ship, a flirting couple, and suddenly he sees beyond the surface to behold
the divine imprint that gives those small things the element of wonder and the dimension of depth.

Suddenly he looks upon these ordinary things and his eyes fly open and he says, "Aha! I see!"
I think of an exchange between a professor and a bright girl known to be dull and uncreative.
The professor had given her an assignment, to write a 500-word essay on any building in America.
A week later the girl returned to class complaining, "I can't think of anything to say."
The professor said, "Alright, write me an essay on any building in Bozeman, Montana, where we live."
The girl returned a week later, even more flustered, saying, "I just can't seem to write anything."
The professor said, "Alright, I want you to stand in front of the Opera House on Bozeman's Main Street.
I want you to write an essay on just the front of that Opera House."
A week later the girl returned, beaming, with a five-thousand word essay. "How did you do it?" he asked.
The girl said, "I started by focusing upon on one brick. The words began to flow.
Then I focused on a second brick and suddenly I couldn't stop myself from writing."
She had looked at a single brick, ordinary and mute.
But as she peered at that brick, the wonder and majesty of life beyond which it pointed
thrilled her with the fluency of meaning in life.
What is it about your faith that gives you the curiosity and concentration needed to peer
at some small thing and be filled with the fluency and wonder of life?

Two men walk on a road.
As they walk, they are joined by a stranger who seems to have been living in a cave,
for he seems to know nothing about the extraordinary events that have transpired over the holiday weekend,
seems to know nothing of the holy man Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, torture and crucifixion.
He seems not to have heard the rumors of this Jesus' resurrection,
though the two men admit that they know not what to make of such reports.
But when they reach their destination, the two men do a small thing:
they invite the stranger into their house for supper.
There the stranger does a small thing, too:
he blesses the bread and breaks it.
Suddenly in that small act they are given resurrection eyes to see the risen Lord
and the in-breaking of God's eternal Kingdom.

What event this week will generate in you a spirit of Thanksgiving?
What event will generate in you resurrection eyes?
Will it be seeing someone you love, someone whom you haven't seen in a while and clasping them to your
breast?
Will it be the aroma of turkey and dressing?
Will it be the mere act of someone breaking bread?
Be curious about ordinary things and see the divine imprint that undergirds them all.
Then realize how rich is your life, how good is your God, how real is the divine mark upon every aspect of
your being.
Be filled with thanksgiving and turn your life into an instrument of the divine!
For when you do such things,
you will be seeing the gift of your existence for what it truly is.
May it be so. May it be so.

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The Fifth and Last in the Series, The Powers That Shape Our Being