

Small Things Greatly Loved

Isaiah 65:17-25

November 14, 2010

My mailbox “overfloweth” with Christmas gift catalogues and coupons. How about your mailbox? I admit that I am of two minds. On the one hand, Thanksgiving hasn’t even come yet. Why am I being asked to do Christmas even earlier this year? Do I get brownie points with God if I take care of Christmas before I buy the Thanksgiving turkey?

Clearly not. Yet the other day I found myself with a \$20 coupon in one hand and a catalogue in the other hand, perusing \$75 worth of gifts so I could get \$20 worth of discount out of my coupon. Now, there’s a catch. The catch is I have to spend my money before Thanksgiving!

So, let’s see, how does this work? If I spend \$75 *in November* this year to save \$20, do I get the opportunity *in October* next year to spend \$100 in order to save \$30? And the following year, perhaps *in September* I will be fortunate enough to spend \$200 to save \$50? Do you see where this is going? If my math is correct, over three years I will spend \$375 in order to save \$80. AND, I will be sitting in the sweltering heat of *summer* with Christmas coupons piling up around me!

So there I am, caught in the dream that I am kicking off a season of love and giving, when I am actually just toting up my own financial scorecard!

Here’s another thing. Let’s assume I buy the dream. Do I get to be a better father, son, brother, lover, pastor or friend because I have bought in? I don’t think so. And I seriously doubt you think so, either.

There is another way. I am aware that underneath my own foolish scorekeeping sitting there among my pile of catalogues and coupons, there is a yearning in my heart. I yearn to be part of a better way. Not at any special season, but all the time!

There is a phrase in our lesson this morning that strikes a chord in me. Within this beautiful text picturing the new heaven and the new earth God would create around us, the text says, God's people will "long enjoy the work of their hands." Literally it means that people will harvest their own fields and build and inhabit their own homes – not for some absentee landowner. They will enjoy, literally, the "fruits of their own labors."

At another level, though, the text is saying that the work of our hands can be the work of God. You see, God's grandeur shows up when we do our work. And our work, as Mother Teresa once said, is not to do great things, but to do *small things with great love*.

We bump into small opportunities all the time, but we seldom think of them as bursting with God's grandeur. And yet our days are littered with small opportunities to realize that the ways of the world are not God's ways and that there is no special season reserved to truly enjoy the work of our hands. When we seize the small things, we begin to glimpse the big things.

I had my own opportunity yesterday afternoon. My youngest daughter Lydia was running in the New England prep school cross country championships up in Deerfield. Now Lydia and I are still working on our relationship since my divorce from her mother. I wouldn't describe my relationship with Lydia as acrimonious, but neither is it as close as it once was. We're working on it. That's a good thing. Also, Lydia is seventeen years old and in her own world. So I arrive up at Deerfield, find a parking place, find her team, get an offhand wave when I find Lydia, and spend the next several hours wandering around pretty much on my own watching ten schools compete in both boys and girls varsity and junior varsity cross country races.

The last race of the day, just as the sun is starting to set, is the junior varsity girls. Even though this is the last and slowest of the races, it is very competitive. Seventy girls of all sizes and shapes, all pumped up on a beautiful afternoon before hundreds of on-lookers, take off like jack rabbits at the gun. All except one girl. By the time the race is 500 yards old, this girl is already 50 yards behind. She is neither fat nor thin, tall nor short. She is simply racing at her own pace.

Now at the end of the race course is a “chute”, a roped off corridor that funnels the runners down into a single line at the finish line so each time and place can be recorded to a split second. So the parents, team mates, coaches, and on-lookers all crowd up against the chute, cheering and clapping for the winners. And on they come. The winners come in at a very respectable 20 minutes or so for this 3.1 mile course. By the time we reach finisher number 35 or so, we’re at 24 or 25 minutes and the crowd has started to thin out. When finisher number 69 comes in at about 28 minutes there are just a few of us still looking on.

I decide to stay to the very end and see what happened to the very last girl. I don’t know quite why except to say that in this very competitive world of prep school athletics where your place in the social pecking order is defined down to the second and to putting on just the “look,” I thought I would stick around and cheer for the last place finisher. Sure enough, as she comes into view over the shadowy field at about 30 minutes, there are just three of us on-lookers left: myself, the scorer, and one other man. The other man and I applaud vigorously as the girl finishes the race. The scorer looks relieved to close up before dark.

My work done, I wander off to find my daughter’s team. The team (it seems) has moved on to the awards ceremony, so I return to my car in the parking lot behind the gym. It’s kind of a long wait in the growing dark. As I stand there by my car so Lydia can find me, the driver in the car next to mine gets out of his car and comes up to me. It’s the other man at the end of the race. He’s the father of the girl who finished at her own pace and he wants to thank me for staying to the end to cheer for his daughter.

So we stand there in the dark, two fathers waiting for their daughters. There's not really much in common between us except the fatherhood of daughters and the ups and downs of belonging to a world where success and failure are measured in split seconds, where the crowd sticks around only for the winners, and the scorer is anxious to close up and go home.

There is a moment's companionship between this man and myself. I don't know his name. Between us, though, is a glimpse of a world where every child is a winner and the crowd cheers as lustily for the last as for the first. It is a peaceable kingdom between us, strange because such small things move the hearts of fathers, beautiful because even small things touch on great love.

My people, says the Lord in the text this morning, *shall long enjoy the work of their hands*. This season, all seasons, lie in our hands. Let us remember that the grandeur of God is glimpsed lived not in doing great things, but in bumping into small opportunities that reveal great love already at work. May we realize that each one of us is loved this way, as someone seen by God as already perfect – *no matter how fast or slow our legs can carry us!* And may we truly understand that we were meant to enjoy this work, to inhabit it without a scorecard, and to imagine a new heaven and a new earth before us!

Amen