

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
chuck@blaisdells.net
November 20, 2016 Thanksgiving Sunday
©2016

Say It With Psalms 8. It's the Little Things

Deuteronomy 8:7-14, 17-18 The Message. God is about to bring you into a good land, a land with brooks and rivers, springs and lakes, streams out of the hills and through the valleys. It's a land of wheat and barley, of vines and figs and pomegranates, of olives, oil, and honey. It's land where you'll never go hungry - always food on the table and a roof over your head. It's a land where you'll get iron out of rocks and mine copper from the hills. After a meal, satisfied, bless God, your God, for the good land he has given you. Make sure you don't forget God, your God, by not keeping his commandments, his rules and regulations that I command you today. Make sure that when you eat and are satisfied, build pleasant houses and settle in, see your herds and flocks flourish and more and more money come in, watch your standard of living going up and up - make sure you don't become so full of yourself and your things that you forget God, your God, the God who delivered you from Egyptian slavery.... If you start thinking to yourselves, "I did all this. And all by myself. I'm rich. It's all mine!" - well, think again. Remember that God, your God, gave you the strength to produce all this wealth so as to confirm the covenant that he promised to your ancestors - as it is today.

Psalms 77:11-14a New Revised Standard Version. I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds. Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God? You are the God who works wonders.

I suspect that many of you know the classic 1980 movie, "Airplane." It was the first of several satires on disaster movies and it went on to have a number of sequels. The setup for the film is simple: both of the pilots on the plane had eaten the fish for their dinners and then it was discovered that the fish would cause severe gastric upset. You also know this was a long time ago, since the airline was serving all the passengers in coach a hot meal. The pilots are incapacitated and a passenger has to come forward to the cockpit to fly the plane to a successful landing, despite his own fears that he isn't talented enough to do so. But he does, and there is great and wild acclaim for his successfully landing the plane and saving the lives of all the crew and passengers.

Here's my confession for the morning: that is one of my secret fantasies too.

Me, with my 250 hours of flying single-engine propeller planes, am suddenly the only one who can save a jet plane full of people. And so, striding forward to the cockpit with manly resolve, I take the left seat (I don't know where the pilots went, but then fantasies don't have to make sense, do they?). I call Air Traffic Control without a trace of nerves, tell them our predicament, and they successfully talk me down to a grease-it-on landing while from the back of the plane can be heard the shouts and applause of all the now-saved passengers. I am modest on CNN as I am interviewed, but secretly am pleased.

OK, pretty silly, huh? But now it's your turn, at least in your own minds: what is YOUR big fantasy, the "big thing" that you sometimes daydream about doing that will be a game-changer, something truly wondrous and wonderful, something that the world will ooh and aah over! For some people, that fantasy, that daydream has something to do with doing something great, something spectacular, some truly grand and glorious for God. But the great Disciples preacher, teacher, and storyteller Fred Craddock once had this to say about those sorts of grand fantasies, glorious gestures for God, versus the everyday realities of that faith. Hear his wise words:

"To give my life for Christ appears glorious..." And we [sometimes] think that giving our all to the Lord is like taking a thousand dollar bill and laying it on the table. "Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all."

But the reality for most of us is that [God] sends us to the bank and has us cash in [that] thousand dollars for quarters.

[And] We go through life putting out twenty-five cents here and... there. [We] Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, "Get lost." [We] Go to a committee meeting. [We] Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home.

For quite frankly, Craddock reminds us,

*Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in **all those little acts of love, twenty-five cents at a time.** It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; **[but] it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul.**¹*

¹Quoted in and adapted from weekly email from Sermonwriter.com by Richard Donovan, November 15, 2005. www.sermonwriter.com Emphasis mine.

Our first scripture for this morning is the record of God's instructions to the people of Israel as they were camped across the river from the promised land, ready to finally finish the journey that had begun when they had fled Pharaoh in Egypt forty years earlier. And I imagine that those who were gathered there on that riverbank themselves had all kinds of "one thousand dollar" thoughts and dreams running through their heads: dreams of glory, dreams of doing some **spectacular** thing for God, dreams of doing something so fantastic in this new home that it would be remembered forever by the people. Thousand dollar thoughts and dreams, all of them.

But the reality was that over the next ten generations in their new home in the promised land there was far, far more opportunity – as is also the case in your life and my life – to do those twenty-five cent kinds of actions than there were those dreamed-about, blaze-of-glory, thousand dollar opportunities. Because most of the things that make for starting a community and building a society from scratch are an accumulation of countless small things. There are trees to be felled so that crops can be planted. There is the undramatic but essential work of finding good water and making sure that everyone has enough of it. There are houses to be built and the very undramatic work of clearing the land and finding the materials and setting brick upon brick, joist upon joist. There is the work that needs to be done – one small step at a time – of building a new home for God, a temple, to replace the ark of the tabernacle that had been carried with them. And you know what it's like to do a construction or renovation project, and I suspect that they too wrestled with the hundreds of undramatic and twenty-five-cent decisions about what kind of wood to use and the color to paint the parlor. There were widows and orphans to be cared for and the unexciting but absolutely essential, twenty five cent decisions that needed to be made about how to make sure that these ones didn't fall through the cracks of this new society.

I suspect it was the same on that first Thanksgiving on American soil almost 400

years ago. For at least some of the Pilgrims too had come with high hopes, dreams of glory for God, big and dramatic and “thousand dollar dreams” of building a new Jerusalem that kept their them excited on the long voyage across the Atlantic. But then the reality turned out to be so very, very different. Instead of a the dramatic, instead of a blaze of glory, the Pilgrims struggled with scores and scores of twenty-five cent decisions and actions about how to just survive that first winter, when over half of their company died. They struggled – since, amazingly, not a single one of the Pilgrims had any experience farming – with all those oh-so-necessary but oh-so-small things that one has to do make food come out of the ground. The thousand dollar dreams, those blaze of glory fantasies, were replaced all-too-quickly by the daily struggle just to survive.

You see, Fred Craddock is right: most of the decisions that you and I are called to make day by day by day about how to live as people of faith are not the huge, momentous, capital letter Good versus Evil kind of decisions; no, they are the smaller twenty-five-cent decisions from that huge roll of life’s quarters, as it were, that God has put in our pockets. They are the little things of life. A quarter’s worth of decision *here* about whether to speak up or stay silent about something; a quarter’s worth of deciding *there* about whether to confront racism or homophobia when it appears before you, a quarter’s worth of deciding whether to speak *directly* to that person in your life who has hurt you or whether to gossip to others instead. Every single day: lots of twenty-five cents worth of decisions about little but oh-so-important things: how to be a good and faithful person, a good and faithful son or daughter or parent or grandparent or aunt or uncle or child, a citizen and a church-member.

And consider this: It was not a huge, momentous, thousand dollar, dramatic blaze of glory thing that saved the Pilgrims. No, it was a little thing. A very little thing. But it was what allowed them to have that very first Thanksgiving at all. It was a fish.

One small fish. The Native Americans on that cold Massachusetts shore took pity on these bumbling, glory-bedazzled, woefully unprepared would-be settlers and told them a secret. Poke a hole in the ground. Put the seed corn in the hole. Then drop in a fish. One little fish. That one little fish, surely one of life's twenty-five cent things if there ever was one, is what made the corn flourish. The fish fertilized the soil. And it allowed the corn stalk not just to grow but to thrive and prosper and be bountiful. So for better and worse all the tragedy and the glory of the next several centuries of New England life was made possible by the Native Americans' little agricultural tip of one small fish dropped in one small hole with one small seed.

That's exactly the kind of thing our scripture this morning has in mind when it tells and warns the Hebrew people of what they must never, ever forget when they enter the new land; hear it again:

Make sure that when you eat and are satisfied, build pleasant houses and settle in, see your herds and flocks flourish and more and more money come in, watch your standard of living going up and up - make sure you don't become so full of yourself and your things that you forget God, your God, the God who delivered you from Egyptian slavery.... [Don't] start thinking to yourselves, "I did all this. And all by myself.

Here is the point: The Hebrew people were to be the recipients of the fish that other people had dropped in the holes. Those wheat and barley fields, those fig trees and abundant bread and honey didn't just spring out of nowhere but were all made possible by those before them who had done a lot of the hard work, a lot of the day in and day out of labor, making thousands of twenty-five cent decisions about what to do and how to do it. And that is the lesson for us this morning as we anticipate Thanksgiving this week. For as we sit in this beautiful place this morning, surrounded by folks who give us life, I hope you realize – as I do – that this Thanksgiving in this place with this people has been indeed made possible by God and the way that God worked through the lives of so many of our ancestors as **they** did the work in this place of making it a home, as they made all the little decisions that would – as it turned out – have enormous

consequences. We are here today at First Christian Church because so many other people, past and present, have helped us drop a fish into whatever hole was facing us that our work, our ministry, our lives might also flourish and be bountiful. *You see, every single one of us is indeed the creation of, the beneficiary of, countless others who dropped fish in the holes of the soil of our lives making possible a harvest, an inheritance, that they themselves would never see. Every single one of us is the creation of, the beneficiary of, countless others who offered up their own quarters, as it were, towards what would become your life and my life.* There are, despite the lie the culture often tells, no self-made people, and there certainly are no self-made Christians. We are who we are because of all those little things – and no doubt some big things too – that we have been the beneficiaries of.

And that sentiment is a fitting place to end this fall sermon series on the Psalms, for our Psalm of the morning says of our Creator, “You are the God who works wonders.” In the past, in the present, and into the future, despite our anxieties, despite our worries and fears about ourselves, our family, our nation, this world, God will continue to seek to work wonders in ways large and small in each and every life. But that also means, as I have said more than once, such a wonderful word of grace also comes to us a word of challenge, and I believe that word of challenge this Thanksgiving week is two-fold: First, I invite you to think about someone in your past who helped make you who you are, someone who – perhaps when life was hard or hurtful – dropped their own little fish into your life in a way that made all the difference in your ability to move forward, to be a better person. And then find those people and tell them “thank you.” Or if they are no longer with us, name them in thanksgiving to God in your prayers. And then, second, look around you this week for someone whose life needs a little fish put into its soil. Is there a word you can offer that would be the word that is needed? Is there something you can do that will be a small thing whose results could

be very large? Most of us will not be given the opportunity to do, in Dr. Craddock's image, a thousand dollar thing, a ten thousand dollar thing, a blaze of glory. But we **will** be able to do many, many smaller things which will have, like those first fish in those first seed holes at that first Thanksgiving, consequences that we can never imagine and, through the grace of God, will indeed create bounty and blessing for those who come after us.

For such a word of grace, for such little but mighty opportunities, for the wonderful works of God indeed, thanks be to God. Amen!