

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, October 3, 2010  
Rev. John Tapscott

**"THE GREATNESS OF SMALL THINGS"**

2 Kings 5:1-15

We tend to be fascinated with large things, powerful people and grand events. In the Toronto Star recently there was a photo of that big condo going up in the center of Mississauga, the so-called Marilyn Munroe. The headline read "Spectacular!" I don't know about you but I think the building just looks weird. It's true for the church, too, not the weird part, but the size part. We are impressed by big churches and large congregations. In so many things we say, "Bigger is better!" "Go big or go home!" Which reminds me of something I read - that large vehicles like SUV's which seemed dead a couple of years ago, are making a comeback and selling well again. Not good news for those of us who drive small cars and often end up in a parking space with an SUV on one side and a van on the other. But size does not impress God. In fact, God uses what is small and insignificant to accomplish great things.

In 2 Kings 5 we read of Naaman, the commander of the strong and victorious Syrian army. He was a great man, esteemed by his nation. But one day he awoke and to his dismay saw on his skin signs of that dread and highly contagious disease, leprosy. Soon Naaman would have to be set apart from the army, from his family and the general population. He would have to spend the rest of his days among lepers. As the disease progressed, his limbs would become deformed and eventually drop off. Finally the disease would claim his life. "The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy."

He suffered from another disease, too. For he and we too, suffer from a deadly disease called sin. The Bible says that "all have sinned and fall short of God's glory." This disease is even more deadly than leprosy. "The wages of sin is death," says Scripture, not just physical death, but spiritual death, eternal separation from our holy God. This disease is even more contagious than leprosy. We cannot quarantine sinners, nor can we be quarantined from sin. It was passed on from Adam and Eve to every one of us. We are responsible for it, and we also inherit the gene, so to speak. Now this disease manifests itself differently in everyone. It can make someone a thief or a liar or a gossip or power hungry or violent or greedy or covetous or an addict or prideful or an adulterer or stingy bad-tempered or foul-mouthed. Those are the symptoms, but the virus is in everyone. No one escapes. And that is why we should never

be overly impressed by the powerful and the great achievers. Yes, we honour them and learn from them and benefit from their works. But we don't bow to them. For the high and the mighty have as many problems as the rest of us. They too, are infected with the deadly disease. Beneath the surface, they are no different than anyone else. Scripture says that "God does not see as man sees, they look on the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart." "There is no difference", says Paul, "for all have sinned..." Naaman, though a mighty warrior suffered from leprosy. And he also suffered from a disease called sin, just as we all do.

But notice how God dealt with Naaman's leprosy. A Hebrew girl had been taken captive by the Syrians and served Naaman's wife. She said, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria. He would cure him of his leprosy." So off Naaman went to Israel with his king's blessing, taking with him much money, just in case the cure could be bought. When the King of Israel heard about it, he feared that if Naaman couldn't be cured, the Syrian king would pick a fight with Israel. But Elisha rebuked him, "Why rend your clothes? Let him come to me that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with all his horses and chariots to the prophet's house. Elisha didn't even come out to see him, but spoke to him through a messenger, "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and you shall be made clean." Naaman became angry saying, "I thought that the prophet would come and wave his hand over me, call on the name of the Lord and cure my leprosy with a mighty miracle. But he won't even speak to me. And this Jordan is so small compared to the mighty rivers of Damascus. How can those waters heal me?" He turned away in rage. But his servants came and said to him, "Father, if he had asked you to do something difficult, you would have done it. And you're here now, so why not try this simple thing?" So he went down and washed seven times in the Jordan, and his flesh was restored like a young boy's and he was clean. His life started anew. And he acknowledged the Lordship of Israel's God.

Throughout the story, God used what seemed small and insignificant to accomplish a great work. It began with the quiet word of witness of a little slave girl, followed by the word of Elisha's messenger and the urging of Naaman's servants. God didn't ask Naaman to buy the cure or to do some great work to earn it or make a great sacrifice or pay a great price. God's way was simple and straightforward. God's way was to "Go and wash seven times in the muddy and shallow Jordan River right here in Israel." And when Naaman finally humbled himself, when he made himself small and obeyed God's word, he received his cure.

God uses what seems small and insignificant to accomplish great things. We

want big things, spectacular shows, complicated ways and means. We're impressed by all that. But not God. God's way is quite different. God uses what seems to us small things, things we would never think of, to accomplish his purposes.

Think of how God saved us from the deadly disease. He did it by sending his only Son, not to live in a palace, but to live and work as a carpenter in small town Nazareth. Even when Jesus began teaching and healing people of various diseases, including leprosy, his work was mostly in Galilee. And when Jesus finally went to the city he got caught up in the deadly conspiracy set by the religious and political leadership. Jesus' life ended as he was nailed to a Cross as an criminal. Anyone crucified on the Cross was not great, but an outcast, the lowest of the low. Jesus was without sin but he never quarantined himself from sinners. He became sin for us, says the Scripture. He emptied himself and became low. He died and was buried. Yet through this obscure crucified carpenter whom he raised from the dead, God saved the world from the deadly disease of sin and death.

You see we humans want to do something great, perform some outstanding work, pay some great price to buy our salvation. But God's way is different. "Go down", he says, "put all your faith in my Son. Be washed by his blood and cleansed by his grace. Just receive my Son by faith and you will be saved." This message was foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews. But God's way of salvation is simple and it's all wrapped up in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." God uses what seems small and insignificant to accomplish great things. Through a crucified carpenter comes the salvation of the world. Through Jesus God forgives us, washes us clean by Jesus' blood and breaks the ultimate power of sin so that we will not perish, but have eternal life. In Christ you and I are a new creation. Certainly we are not yet what we will be. But gradually sin is losing its grip on us and by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit we are growing in Christ-like graces. And with Christians around the world today come to the table to renew our faith in Christ and our commitment to serve him through the church.

And think of the church. It had very small beginnings, only 12 apostles. But they were commissioned by the Risen Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to preach the Gospel. So the church grew and continued to grow despite opposition and persecution and eventually became the world-wide church which today celebrates the Holy Sacrament in every corner of the globe. We shouldn't despise or look down at small churches, because the church itself began very small; and God can do great things through just a few committed souls gathered in Christ's Name.

It's true for our service. We may think, "Well, my talent is small, can't do much with that." But Jesus spoke harshly about a person who buried his one talent. You may not have five talents or two. You may only have one, but don't despise it. When you use it in God's service, God can accomplish something great through you.

Today many churches are struggling. We're looking for some spectacular way, some great new program that will halt the church's decline and bring renewal. But perhaps it will happen through small acts. Look at our story today. With a simple word of witness the little slave girl told Naaman where to find healing for his condition. What if the answer to reviving the church lies in doing what that she did? In our daily lives we all talk to people who have problems of various kinds. Sometimes they unload their burden on us, marriage problems, family problems, money problems, personal problems. These problems have a spiritual dimension to them, as well. And I wonder if it ever occurs to us to say to these people, "I know where you might find some help. Why don't you try a church where you can connect with God and receive his help and grace?" Or even better, "Come with me to church on Sunday. I find a blessing there, and you may, too." Perhaps the answer to the church's revival lies not in big spectacular events or programs, but in you and I simply saying an inviting word to people on behalf of the church and the faith.

A boy was walking on the sea shore among thousands of starfish that had washed up and were perishing in the hot sun. One at a time he picked up a fish and threw it back into the water. A man saw him and said, "Why are you doing that? There's thousands of them here. How can you possibly make any difference?" "Well," said the boy as he picked up a fish and flung it into the sea, "At least I made a difference for that one." God uses what seems small and insignificant to accomplish great things. And there is nothing greater than the salvation of a single soul, nothing greater than when one person is washed in the grace of Jesus Christ. It causes the whole company of heaven to rejoice. And you and I can have a part in making it happen. One word can have eternal significance.