

# “The Day of Small Things”

a sermon by

Dr. James F. Miller

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina

July 29, 2007

**Text: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the Lord Almighty.” (Zechariah 4:6)**

In the mid-1960’s the British economist and social theorist E. F. Schumacher caused a stir with a little book entitled Small Is Beautiful, with the suggestive sub-title, “economics as if people mattered.” At that time, you must realize, the UK was in the solid grip of its peculiar form of post-war socialism, under which entire industries had been nationalized: coal; the railroads; steel; ship building, and others. Schumacher’s basic argument simply was that by breaking up these huge and impersonal entities and substituting smaller, more locally run companies, not only would the working environment become more human, but consequently the actual efficiency and profit levels of the various businesses would soar. “Small is beautiful.”

For most of us in our current culture nothing could be further from a slogan for our value system than “small is beautiful.” We live [do we not?] in a constant state of ecstatic admiration of frenzied superlativism: the biggest, the widest, the longest, the fastest, and the tallest. Hollow superlativism can take many forms. When I was a small boy growing up in Ottawa, Canada I was puzzled when the “fall classic,” the annual baseball series between the champions of the National and American leagues, was claimed to be the “world” series. Was baseball not played in Canada, in Cuba, in many Latin American countries, in Japan? As the years have passed and the USA struggles and often fails to win the baseball world cup, the title “world series” becomes a hollow superlative.

Hollow superlatives; we are surrounded by them. This is more than a crisis of language; [although it certainly is that and illustrative of a more widespread issue, rampant grammatical illiteracy which is fast becoming an acceptable mode of discourse ... but that is a digression, if a favorite hobby horse!] Hollow superlativism hides us from real accomplishment, distances us from real potential, and removes from us real ambition. These are all the things of which our text from Zechariah speaks.

Zechariah warns against despising “the day of small things.” He was speaking to the post-exilic Israelite community; those few stragglers who had returned to the Promised Land after a century or so of exile in Babylon. They had grown up hearing stories of the wonders and glories of Jerusalem and of the Temple there; they had been bathed in the superlativism of nostalgic memory. On their return the barren, ruined tiny-ness of it all overwhelmed them with despair. They lost any sense of zest or enthusiasm for rebuilding the structures of the city, for re-crafting the symbols of their faith. So, Zechariah both excoriates and encourages them, all those who “despise the day of small things.”

Now, you may be tempted to think that this means we should make a virtue of failure, of shriveling witness, of collapsing numbers; that somehow it is better to have a small congregation in July when so many of our folks are away on vacation than a full house during “the season;” that somehow it is better that our denomination is a mere fraction of the size it was a few short years ago; that pruning the vineyard is better than harvesting the grapes. Do not think this! This would be to miss Zechariah’s point entirely.

Do you remember what Jesus says in John’s Gospel? “Not only will you do what I have done, but you will do greater things than these.” Greater things than Jesus did? When is the last time you managed to accomplish that; doing something greater than all the things Jesus did? Yet, to that we are summoned; to that superlative standard of witness. The “day of small things” somehow is not in competition with this summons.

Can we make sense of this?

Let me throw light on this apparent paradox and conflict from two different directions [hopefully to illuminate without casting shadows!]

Towards the end of his life the great scholar of eastern religions, Alan Watts, wrote a wonderful little book. It was intended to be the book he believed everyone should give their children as they venture out of the nest. He called it simply The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are. To try and summarize his fundamental insight is ridiculous, but here goes. To understand who we truly are, we must grasp the paradox of context: the smaller the entity, the larger the apparent context.

I saw a magnificent program on TV not so long ago about driver ants in Africa which illustrates what Watts is talking about. These voracious creatures migrate and consume every insect in sight. Farmers love them for they clear out predators from their crops. In the program a driver ant colony goes on a migration. The intricacy and complicated communications amongst millions of ants to make this huge migration possible was mind-boggling. Then at the end of the program came the stunner: the entire migration had been over a distance of a mere 200 yards. For these tiny creatures 200 yards was a vast distance, a huge context, a superlative expanse. Yet, as a child would say, they live in Africa—on the planet—in the solar system—in the cosmos. For humans 200 yards is no expanse at all. Our apparent context is different; we still live in the cosmos, but this apparent context is “smaller” for us than for an ant. Watts puts it this way: “Just as a thing or organism exists on its own; it does not act on its own. Furthermore, every organism

is a process: thus the organism is not other than its actions. To put it clumsily: it is what it does.” The driver ants acted as though 200 yards was a huge expanse and thus for them it was.

We are what we do and we do what we do in our apparent context.

Michael Gladwell makes the same point in a radically different way.

In his book The Tipping Point he speaks of an experiment carried out by two Princeton University psychologists, John Darley and Daniel Batson. They recruited Princeton seminary students who were told they were subjects of a vocational motivation study. They were asked to choose if they had entered study for the ministry primarily because of inner convictions of their heart or primarily to serve others. The group was then randomly divided into two sub-groups; one of which was given some academic theological issue to contemplate; the other was given the parable of the Good Samaritan to ponder. Finally, the two sub-groups were mixed back into the single, larger group, from which each student was randomly told to go one by one to another building. Waiting there, they were told, was a group of faculty to whom they were to make a brief presentation about their vocational motivation. As each student prepared to leave for the other building they were told one of two things right at the door: either, “Hurry you are late; you were meant to be there five minutes ago;” or, “Take your time; we are running behind, you have plenty of time.” Then, on the path between the two buildings an actor lay clearly suffering and in need. The experiment had been set up: which students would stop and tend to the needy person?

You might be tempted to think that the probability of stopping and helping the needy person would be much higher amongst those who had so recently pondered the meaning of the Parable of the Good Samaritan or those whose stated chief motivation was to serve the needy. You would be wrong! The findings were that amongst the group who had been told to hurry up, regardless of their previous assignment or statement of motivational conviction, only 10% stopped to help the man. Of those who had been told they had plenty of time, regardless of the previous assignment or statement of motivational conviction, 63% stopped.

Darley and Batson conclude: what determines how we act is not the inner conviction of our heart or the clarity of our mind, but our immediate context.

“Small is beautiful.” That tiny, immediate context; that is what determines our actions and we are what we do.

So, what are we to do? How can we express faith? What is the way to bring our inner convictions to bear? What is the context for faithful living?

Remember this: the small thing Zechariah was advocating was no secular project. Many secular projects were crying out for completion: building a security wall, restoring farm land, reconstructing the water supply. Zechariah did not address these; he was talking about rebuilding the Temple, restoring worship as the heart-beat of social sanity, re-crafting praise as the motivator for social justice. This is the best thing, the real superlative.

For many this “best thing” may well be too big a thing; it will be too difficult to think that what happens in the sanctuary is both the test and the fuel for what happens in society. For many the sanctuary is a temple of the hollow superlative. But, this is exactly what Zechariah says; the temple is the ultimate, the real, the true superlative. This is the “milk” food that the author of Hebrews is writing about. It is elementary; it is simple; it is the “small thing” that makes our doing of “greater things possible.” Jared Diamond points out in his magnificent book, Guns, Germs, and Steel, that one of the main reasons for the success of the human adventure over other forms of life is the capacity of the adult human to consume dairy products and thus to be able to transport protein. Yogurt and cheese are portable protein, allowing humans to wander far and wide in the search for game, for new lands, for adventure. So, milk food is alright; we need it and can thrive on it. Spiritual dairy food is no small thing to despise. Its elementary constituent is worship, praise, and prayer. These small things are what we do that we may live for Christ in the world, that we may do greater things.

Here are the four small things every Christian must have in order to do greater things for Christ. These small things are the marks of the people of the true superlative.

We Christians must have stars in the eyes. We are called to cosmic dissatisfaction; things are not the way they should be; the world should be saner, safer, more just. We must have stars in our eyes.

We must have certainty in our minds. Ignorance is a choice and we Christians must never make it. Otherwise the stars in our eyes are sheer utopian dreaminess. We need to know what we believe and how to explain it. We must have certainty in our minds.

We must have love in our hearts. The command to love all people is just that; a command. This is not an option for followers of Jesus. We need not like all people nor approve of all that they do, but we are commanded to love them. We must have love in our hearts.

The final small thing is the completion of all the others. Without this final small thing the rest is at best bogus posturing, at worst wild idolatry. Star in the eyes; certainty in the mind; love in the heart, and ....

We must have mud on our hands. Perhaps that means literal mud, the kind you get by going on a mission trip. But, it might be metaphorical mud, the consequence of getting involved, of making an effort, of taking the faith to the world, where it belongs. We must have mud on our hands.

Our culture’s mad superlativism is a sham of grandiose delusion, a doomed attempt to erect significance on the shifting sands of human ambition.

The church’s “day of small things” is the authentic superlative; it is the life of worship and wonder, of faith and love, of hope and service. Never despise the “day of small things.”

*[Soli Deo Gloria]*