

*No Little People, No Little Places* (title from Francis Schaeffer) ----- Ted Boswell

When I read this story I think of the Superbowl, don't you?

No? Well, then I'd best explain.

We're in the midst of that annual craziness called football season,

Involving millions of dollars and almost as many chicken wings and beers,

And it will climax in January at the Superbowl.

Imagine that the often lowly and sometimes heartbreaking Chicago Bears

somehow manage to get to the Superbowl,

against the don't you love to hate 'em New England Patriots,

And that further, the Bear come into the last minute of the game trailing by only 2 points.

In position for a field goal, the crowd awaits the kicker coming onto the field,

but suddenly the crowd, along with bajillions watching on TV, goes quiet . . .

because the player coming onto the field *isn't* the team's kicker.

It's the team's equipment manager, and it's a *she*.

It turns out the team's kicker slipped and had a freak accident in the locker room

just moments before, ending up with a broken ankle.

Someone remembered the equipment manager had played soccer in high school

and sometimes kicked field goals on the practice field for fun.

So now here she is, the unexpected hero center stage before the world,

at the climax of a titanic conflict.

And yes, she nails the kick and becomes the heroine who came from obscurity, from nowhere.

That's really our story today.

Jesus is in conflict with the religious leaders of his day.

During the three years of his public ministry he's stayed mostly away

from their headquarters in Jerusalem,

but after training his disciples for three years

he comes to Jerusalem to confront them and die at their hands.

It's a little bit like the old westerns,

where there's a shootout on mainstreet at the climactic ending .

Jesus doesn't just "come" to Jerusalem, he "pokes the hornet's nest," infuriating his enemies.

He enters in a controversial parade where folks are treating him like a savior, a . . . messiah.

He goes to the center of Judaism, the center of their power, Jerusalem and the Temple.

And in the Temple he creates a ruckus,

turning over the furniture and calling it corrupt and depraved.

(How would it go if I turned over the furniture in this church today and called it corrupt.

I'd probably be helped to the exit by a couple burly deacons!)

The following day Jesus returns to the Temple and with all the people listening

tells a story, a parable, in which the Jewish leaders are called God's *enemies*!

Those leaders are looking to kill Jesus --- just as he predicts in the parable.

After all this we come to today's story.

Jesus describes the Jewish leaders as proud posturers who love to be noticed as important, and then offers a devastating critique of them in one pungent phrase:

“they devour widows' houses.”

We don't know just what the mechanism was, but they were oppressing and exploiting the most vulnerable in their community. Ugly, evil. Damnable.

Finally Jesus contrasts the corrupted religion he has critiqued with ----

ironically, a widow --- who gives an offering of two small coins.

The sound of those coins dropping into the “offering plate”

Echoes down over twenty centuries to millions, indeed Superbowl surpassing bajillions,

To us, right here, right now.

Jesus *sees*, and *uses*, the small and unexpected.

Never in her wildest dreams did that widow expect . . .

that her act of devotion would speak to millions of people over thousands of years.

Usually we don't expect either that God will use us.

But God sees, and uses, the small and unexpected.

There are no little places or little people.

Consider the disciples he picked and used --- a motley rabble full of flaws and foibles.

Consider the despised Samaritan six-time divorcee with a current live in lover

that Jesus turned into a winsome evangelist.

Consider the soldier of the despised Roman oppressors

whom Jesus said had more faith than any Jew he's seen!

Consider the sinful woman who washes Jesus' feet with tears, perfume, and her own hair,

putting a watching Jewish leader to shame.

We could go on, but that's enough to remind us

that using the small and unexpected is part of the Jesus way.

And that means us, too.

When some parent is patiently and sacrificially caring for difficult or disabled child  
or sick or dying spouse

When a Sunday school teacher or Cadet leader faithfully loves kids  
week after week and year after year,

When someone confronts corruption or dishonest business practices at their job  
and risks their job and refuses to go along to get along,

When someone, perhaps you, struggles in school or at work or in sports or music,  
but do your best,

When someone in the desperate grip of a struggle with opioids, or alcohol, or pornography, or gambling, resists temptation and turns away from self destruction, gives in but then weeps and turns back to God, Jesus sees, and cares, and is *pleased*.  
Indeed in the last case he says the angels join him and throw a celebration party.

Now let's pause just a moment and remind ourselves that this isn't about earning God's love, or getting proud and puffed up.  
We're all messed up sinners reconnected to God by grace.  
But we also should recognize we please God sometimes, and we should rejoice in that.  
That's real.

Not only is Jesus pleased, but one never knows where the ripples of love will go.  
Mother Teresa and her coworkers established houses for the dying in Calcutta India, where dying people were brought in off the street so they wouldn't die alone & uncared for,  
Because Mother Teresa said, "The *worst* disease is to be unloved, to be alone."  
Besides Mother Teresa no one knows the name of a single Sister of Charity, much less the names of their dying patients.  
But how many other acts of kindness have they inspired?

I think of Mrs. Tonsheni, a housekeeper in South Africa.

She has no idea that her act of love and generosity has inspired my life for 40 years. . . She was given ten pounds of sugar for a Christmas present one year and the day after Christmas thanked her employer, saying it was good while it lasted. The employer was surprised a whole ten pounds went in on day. Oh, said Mrs. Tonsheni, we gave some to everyone in our village. We couldn't enjoy it alone.

Wow. How many times I've asked God to give me a heart of generosity and sharing like Mrs. Tonsheni. And she has no idea she's touched my life, and perhaps others I've told about her . . .

Or there's E. Stanley Jones, a missionary to India

who wrote some popular best sellers in the early 1900's.

He did have one clunker, a labor of love but a book his publisher called his great failure.

It was about Mahatma Gandhi and his non-violence. It sold bupkis.

But a copy did reach a man named Martin Luther King, and his wife said it was that book that revolutionized and turned King from violence to non-violence.

Would Jones have ever dreamed that his most influential action would be to write a non-selling book that God would use to transform the leader of the civil rights movement in America?

Indeed, if you go down to the King Center in Atlanta ---  
reaching robe, Bible, & Jones's book.

As an aside, who knows but what Jones's words about America may have touched King, when Jones wrote this: "What is America? America is a dream unfulfilled, a dream of a place where a man is a man, a place where race and birth and color are transcended. That is the American dream."

I just read about Nick Hengeveld. You know him?

He's an IT guy at Calvin College and back in 1993 he started messing around with putting the Bible on a new fangled thing called the internet. It turned into Bible Gateway, and 14 billion visits later it's the most visited Christian website on the planet.

I remember my own father . . . and my car accident . . . I totaled his car and had to call and tell him I'd really really messed up. And I was scared to make that call. And when I told him and then replied to his question that no one was hurt, he simply said "Then don't worry, that car would have been on the junkpile in ten years anyway."

You could have knocked me over with a feather. That was *grace*.

And I've never forgotten it. He probably never knew.

I wish I'd told him or could tell him now.

Let's go one step further, though.

Suppose the ripples of your offering of money and love and service don't go anywhere else?

*That* is also a special reflection of God's love.

Because God's love loves us little human beans each and every one

and not because of our great potential or usefulness, but because of his own love.

And when we serve or sacrifice & help some hurting or needy person ---

in our family, at a highway exit ramp, on the job, or at school,

praying for someone in prison, visiting a lonely person,

holding a hurting child, writing a note to a grieving widow,

shoveling our neighbor's driveway,

or a myriad of other things that may never ripple anywhere,

We reflect the love of God that treats us ordinary sinners with tender and sacrificial love

regardless of whether it accomplishes any other thing or not.

*Your* acts of love are seen, noticed, and remembered by your Lord, though completely overlooked by the world. Mother Teresa, of whom we spoke earlier, said that "Many of us cannot do great things [as the world sees 'great' things], but we can all do small things with great love." And God sees that.

What kindness or quiet sacrifice are you making in your life and work that is unnoticed by others and the world around? This morning know that Jesus sees, and Jesus may use your love in ways you never dream.

Jesus sees, and uses, small and unexpected things.  
But we want to go on and look for a moment  
at the poor widow's specific action and Jesus' analysis of it.

Notice first that what Jesus and the author of Luke highlight  
as beautiful spirituality contrasting with the corrupt religious leaders ---- is about money.

O that I had time to talk about money at length this morning!  
(Someone here is thinking "O give thanks that he does *not* have the time.")

Seriously, I'd love to preach a whole series on it.  
The reason is that money is a wonderful spiritual opportunity.  
But lots of us, congregants and preachers, are shy to speak about money.

Why?

I understand that many have abused the subject,  
but isn't the remedy *good and true* teaching about it, so that we can experience blessing?  
You see, deep inside a lot of us are touchy about money because we don't really believe  
that God's guidance on it will really for *our* good.

We treat God as one more outstretched hand looking for a donation,  
to take away some treasure of ours.

Seek out the Bible's teaching on money --- following it will enrich (if I may put it that way),  
ENRICH your life.

I'm always happy to preach about money.  
Because Jesus talked more about money than prayer.  
He said money was a *spiritual* issue.

He said if you want to know a person's heart --- check their wallet.  
Where your treasure is, he said, there will your heart be also.

I understand that people are put off by preachers or ministries that seem to abuse money  
and take advantage of ordinary people's giving,  
preachers in fancy homes and private jets, etc....

TV preachers imploring folks to send "seed money" that will multiply, and so on.  
But I always just say "Then give to someplace you do trust!" It's not about me.

I'm happy to talk about money because I see it as an opportunity to be set free  
from the world's value system  
where people are enslaved by their concerns about money.

It's the "kingdom of thingdom" where the world means more than Jesus.  
The unknown widow with her sacrificial gift points us to Jesus' himself.

It says in 2nd Corinthians that He who was rich beyond all measure,  
all for love's sake became poor.  
There's a wonderful book *The Treasure Principle*, and I brought a dozen copies.  
Because instead of making me feel burdened about giving,  
It made me feel like "This could be *fun*."

So I encourage you to ask your preacher to preach about money, repeatedly ---  
so you can find joy in giving and draw closer to God through money.

If that sounds bizarre,  
is it perhaps a sign we don't really think God's guidance is trustworthy,  
listening to him about money won't be a blessing to us.

Well, having stirred you up just a bit on that let's look for just a moment  
at this teaching on money --- and all of life, as we will see.  
Jesus does not count like we do.  
It is not the gift, but the cost to the giver, that moves the heart of Jesus.

Giving ----

Lewis --- "I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably **giving** away too little.

If I go to church with one of my high school students and they give \$5 and I give \$50,  
Who gave more? It could well be the student  
who may have given up some soda or entertainment to give that money.

Me on the other hand, what's \$50? I'm a rich teacher!

The amazing thing is that no one needs to "wait" to grow up and have money.

You've got all you need to give a meaningful gift.

In fact, in one sense you'll never have more than you have now.

Indeed, Bill Gates doesn't have any more than you, when it comes to giving!

Think of the poor guy --- if he gives \$39 BILLION

he has to scrape by on the remaining *1,000 million*.

But someone with \$50,000 who gives 5 thousand had really made a costly gift.

My mother in law, Oma Nonnekes turned her rubber gloves inside out, in part she said to be able to give more to missions.

I remember some generous Japan mission givers when I was a missionary there.

They were on small fixed incomes, and gave a costly \$5 a month.

But I don't want to stop with money,  
because all of life is religious and we give to God in all that we do.

Jim Miller was on my football team in high school, and he was lousy. But he was a better man than I was, I saw, because he put his heart into week in and week out, more than me.

(I'm happy to say that ten years later I learned  
he was named coach of the year in Jacksonville, Florida.)

Destiny Johnson was a student of mine who worked so, so, so hard  
and barely got a 2.0 grade point average.

And I was so, so, so proud of her when she graduated.

Other students coasted to a B+ average. Who was God more pleased with?

Cleaning a toilet or emptying a bedpan may bring joy to Jesus's heart.

Perhaps as Christians we could wear nice little toilet brushes around our necks  
as a symbol of our religion --- the sign of the toilet brush.

I've had to apply this in my own life. I'm a teacher, not a great one, not the one I dreamed of  
being or would like to be.

(90% of teachers say they're above average --- not likely mathematically!

I figure I'm average. But it's my best, I've poured my heart into it, sometimes

70-80 hours a week, for years. So I need to see that as my two coins Jesus rejoices in.

Where are you giving your best and you should know Jesus accepts it with joy?

(Or where are you *not* giving your best, and you need to reevaluate?)

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Here's an interesting exercise: Our story today is a woman in an unexpected spotlight.

Just as I thought about the Superbowl and the equipment trainer heroine,

Try to imagine other scenarios.

Perhaps it is the Academy Awards and the award for best actor goes to ---

A kid in a high school musical who poured their heart into it.

Perhaps it is the inauguration of the President of the United States,

And the president has a man sit beside him during the ceremony and

During his speech introduces him as the man that shines his shoes with love and skill.

Perhaps it is . . . I don't know, what can you imagine.

I do imagine this ---

One of the joys of heaven may be to hear stories of love and rejoice in them.

I like to picture throngs of heaven gathered, millions of people, and Jesus onstage to speak with them,

And he says, "Just a moment, I've got someone for you to meet."

Then he walks across the stage --- past Billy Graham and the Pope and all the best selling Christian authors and the megachurch pastors, and pulls a shy little Jewish woman out on stage. "This," says Jesus, "Is Golda, and she's the widow who taught so many love by her gift in the temple in Jerusalem. Give it up for Golda!" And millions upon millions of people applaud and shout their love, and thousands and thousands of mighty angels sing for joy and blow trumpets of salutation.

And Golda, she doesn't know what to do, she just cries tears of joy as she stands there with the arm of Jesus around her shoulders and a smile on his face and the hosts of heaven giving her props.

Does it sound like science fiction? I invite you to think not. Something like this will happen, and there will be so many other stories.

I know for example, that some folks who have given money and prayed for Japan, where I worked for 14 years, are going to get to heaven, and unexpectedly a little Japanese woman is going to come running to them with a giant smile and wrap her arms around them and say "Finally, I've been looking forward to this so much, I want to thank you for caring about me, and helping me to find Jesus and eternal life. I never had the chance on earth, but I want to thank you now.

This morning I want to invite you to escape from this world's kingdom of thingdom which values money and status and fame and power.

Jesus doesn't see it that way.

And he wants you to know that he sees *your* unknown acts of love and sacrifice.

Escape from the world's value system and life for Jesus in a life where every simple act of service and sacrifice counts for him.

Know that in your life, and in this world, there are no little people, no little places.