

## THE POWER OF SMALL: Finding God in the Tiny Things of Life

This month of devotionals will focus on finding a big God in the small details, especially the small faithful acts of obedience that we sometimes take for granted. These rest stops will also reflect my sorrow as I grieve the loss of my sister-in-law, Miriam Hershberger. She was killed in a tragic accident in March 2005, cut off from life in a moment. When I think of Miriam, I think of small acts of kindness, simple living and being faithful in the ordinary tasks of life. Does that kind of integrity matter? Does God work in the small things of life?

### **REST STOP #1: American spies, Christmas carols and tiny drops of water**

My sister-in-law Miriam never set out to be an American spy. This accusation, made by the Vietnamese government, was at the very least not factual, and at the most simply ludicrous. Ludicrous, that is, if you knew Miriam. There wasn't an espionage bone in her body, not an ounce of conniving, no duplicity—she wasn't even into adventure films! Miriam was in Vietnam because of her love for the Vietnamese people and for God. Working with an organization called Mennonite Central Committee, she taught English as a second language to students at the University of Foreign Language Study in Hanoi. She centered her life around small acts of kindness, concrete acts of faithfulness to God. She taught students simple words like house and cat. She couldn't have possibly been a threat to any government.

Or could she?

One small (subversive?) act was to teach her students the Christmas song, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." The first verse goes like this:

I heard the bells on Christmas day

Their old familiar carols play

And wild and sweet the words repeat

Of peace on earth, good will to all.

But she didn't stop with the first verse. She taught them the second verse as well.

Then in despair I bowed my head

There is no peace on earth, I said

For hate is strong and mocks the song

Of peace on earth, good will to all.

The students nodded their heads. They understood that despair. Most of them had been babies or young children during the "Christmas bombings" of 1972. They lost their homes and many of them, their parents.

Then Miriam taught them the third verse.

Then pealed the bells more loud and clear

God is not dead, nor doth he sleep

The wrong shall fail, the right prevail

For peace on earth, good will to all.

It was such a small thing—an old Christmas hymn taught to a handful of students in a stuffy classroom. Small words about God and peace to people who had lived through the horrors of war.

One simple song. Did it really matter?

Maybe. If you add this one small act to a thousand other small acts, then maybe you have something. Like tiny drops of water, seemingly nothing by themselves, this song and the conversation in the hallway after class and the extra teaching sessions and the notes of encouragement—maybe when your words about love and peace are surrounded by a thousand other deeds, then the tiny drops become a stream, and over time, a mighty river.

A river of God from tiny drops of water. A thousand touches of Jesus himself in a land that says God doesn't exist.

No wonder they deported her as a spy. She threatened their whole system. It's such an irony because the last thing Miriam set out to do was make any waves. She was quiet, hated to draw attention to herself, soft-spoken, gentle and kind. And faithful. And that faithfulness scared a government so much they had to get rid of her.

Now ... perhaps I exaggerate. The Vietnamese government may have misconstrued a couple documents and misunderstood a couple phrases in the letters she wrote. Maybe they thought she really was an American spy. Maybe her deportation had nothing to do with her small acts of kindness and everything to do with misinterpreted signs of espionage. Maybe, one year after Tienemman Square, the government just wanted to flex its muscles and Miriam was an easy target.

Maybe.

But maybe there were other forces at work, powers and principalities that understood quite well the threat of a pure heart, the threat of a thousand small acts of a soul sold out to God.

I saw the power of a thousand small acts at Miriam's funeral last week. I saw something I had not seen for a long time—people from all different walks of life speaking to each other. Speaking with hope and purpose. I talked with teachers who worked with her in an inner-city elementary school, teachers who were so tired from their impossible work. They talked about how Miriam would stay after class, how she would never give up on a student. What were they going to do without her? I talked to some of the mothers whose children she taught. They spoke of how she worked to help the children learn English. They held in their hands the notes she wrote to them in Khmer or Laotian or Thai. Over four hundred people, representing six different ethnic groups, came that day, to honor a quiet woman who never sought the limelight, who refused to call attention to herself. They came to honor a woman who never sought out that honor.

Quiet deeds of kindness. Small, subversive acts of obedience to the only Lord. Tiny drops of water that make a mighty river.

## REST STOP #2: A Guided Meditation on Acts 3:1-10

It's first century Palestine. Imagine yourself walking down a crowded street on a hot, dusty day. You are winding your way to the Temple. You are alone, and yet not alone, as many others walk in the same direction, going to the same destination. Amidst the clatter of many feet, there is almost a quiet hush, a sense of reverence as you get closer.

Up ahead you see four people carrying a pallet upon which lies a man. He's about 28 years old, but his eyes speak of a man much older. A man who has almost lost hope. They drop him off at the Gate called Beautiful. There he stretches out his hand and begs for money. A few people ahead of you stop and drop some coins into his hands, barely looking at him. "Sinner," some of them sneer.

What are you going to do? You finger the coins in your pocket. What are you going to do?

Just up ahead are two men. There is nothing unusual about them, except that when the beggar asks them for alms, they stop. They really stop and look at him. More odd yet, they ask the man to look at them. He puts out his hand to them, more tentatively this time.

You look at him for a moment. What do you see?

You look at the two men. What do you see there?

The taller man speaks, his voice cutting through the crowd noise like a trumpet. "I have no silver or gold, but what I have, I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk."

You catch your breath. The pressing throng stops as one. It seems like the whole world has heard his bold statement. The only sounds are birds in the trees.

Peter moves toward the beggar and takes his hand and hoists him up. The lame man, his mouth open in astonishment, totters just once, then walks ... then leaps in mid air.

There are audible gasps and whispers as the crowd watches the beggar, the former beggar, dance with joy. "Praise God! Praise the Lord! I walk! I am free!"

And you ... what do you do as you watch the man laugh and jump and almost dance his way to the temple? How do you feel? What will you say to the God he so loudly praises, once you get to your place of prayer?

Or ... maybe you are another person in this story. Maybe you are the beggar. What does it mean to be healed? Or are you still sitting and waiting for someone to come?

Are you a disciple? Like Peter and John, maybe you have no silver and gold. Or is the silver and gold in your pocket part of the problem? What do you have to offer the man who looks up to you with pleading eyes? What can you give?

Peter and John gave what they had. What do you have?

Even a tiny bit of faith is enough.

Look up. The lame man has turned away from the Temple and has started walking toward you. He wants to talk to you. What will you say?

What will you say?

### **REST STOP #3: Guided Meditation**

#### **Feeding the 5000: Mark 6:30-44 and John 6:1-13**

For as far as you can see, there is this crowd. Quite frankly, all day long there has been this crowd. Needy people everywhere. How many people can Jesus heal in one day?

He's tired.

You are tired.

Let's get out of here, Jesus.

You and Jesus and the others tried once, earlier today, to walk away from this bunch, to go to the other side of the hill.

They followed you.

Compassion fatigue, Jesus. You ever hear of it?

Peter, they're hungry.

Well ... yes, Lord.

Where are we going to buy bread for all these people?

Are you crazy Lord? Six months wages wouldn't feed half of 'em.

(Maybe the fatigue is getting to you, Jesus).

Where will we get the bread?

So up comes Andrew, with this tag-along kid and a basket.

We got a boy here with five loaves and 2 dried fish. He's willing to share.

Is this supposed to be funny?

(Or does Andrew know something you don't?)

Peter, they're hungry.

I know Master but—

So feed them.

But—

Make them sit down.

But ...

Jesus, why can't we just send them away? It's too much.

Jesus ... it's too much.

While Jesus is praying the blessing over the food, you sneak a peek at the crowd.

About 50-60 groups of 100 people each.

At least.

Peter, come here.

(You get a funny feeling in your gut. Or is it just your own hunger?)

Here Peter—take this.

You look at what he holds in his hands. It's one of the small loaves, the boy's loaves. It's as big as the palm of your hand.

Well ... go feed the people.

Are you crazy?

He is crazy.

And he's not letting you off the hook this time.

You stare at the biscuit and then at the little black-haired girl who sticks her hand out at you. Ten more hands frame her face.

Oh wow.

Big deep breath.

You tear a thumbnail sized bite off and place it in the little girl's hand.

Fifteen more hands demand your attention. Fifteen hands and one stupid biscuit? You look at the Master for a sign—something.

Give them what you have.

You heard me.

Give them what you have.

Numb with fatigue, you tear bread. More hands, more tearing. Hands, bread, hands, bread.  
And suddenly, it hits you.

You aren't running out.

The bread doesn't run out.

Give them what you have, he says.  
Give them what you have.

Forget the tearing. You just start throwing the stupid loaves!  
Here you go! Watch out! Hey you, I'm sending a loaf your way!  
Want some more? Here, little black-haired girl, take it all.

There's more than enough.

You stop and look around. People are laughing and shouting and throwing bread.  
It's a party. Wow, what a party!

Now it's quiet.

I'm pooped.

Yeah, me too.

Lord?

Yes?

Can we rest now?

Yeah.

#### **REST STOP #4: Starting Small with Prayer**

How does prayer work? In our modern world of science and advanced technology, what does it mean to pray? Is prayer some psychological practice that weak-minded people do to make themselves feel better? Is it a way to control nature, cure diseases and free us from our troubles? Is prayer the way we get our will to submit to the unchanging will of God? Or is prayer the way we work with God to change the world?

Can we change God's mind?

Prayer is listening to and interacting with a radically free God. But what does that mean? When people pray (or think about how prayer works), they tend to make one of two mistakes. Some fall into the “ditch” of believing that prayer is nothing more than a feel good mumbo-gumbo exercise. It’s a nice thing to do, a fine thing to do, but change anything? Hardly. Prayer is pretty benign.

Others fall into the “ditch” of seeing prayer as a magic pill. If we pray just right or long enough, God will give us whatever we ask. It’s a sure thing. This understanding, taken to its extreme, makes God into a Diving Being we manipulate, not love. God is a cosmic pop machine—just put in the right coins and push the button.

But prayer is relationship, a relationship with the almighty God. Both of the ditches above try to put God in a box that God refuses to fit into. Can we change God’s mind through prayer? Sometimes. Does God say no even through we pray with all kinds of faith? Sometimes. Does prayer change our situation for the better? Always. But our definition of better or miraculous or answered prayer is sometimes different than God’s definition.

God is radically free, and being made in God’s image, so are we. We are free to help bring the kingdom of heaven here on earth—through prayer and action. We are free to ignore God and bring disastrous consequences to our loved ones, the whole world and ourselves. And if God is really going to honor that free will placed in us, then bad things are going to happen.

So we pray. We pray believing that God does hear us and that we change and the world changes and the kingdom comes. But we know that this change is sometimes not apparent and sometimes slower and sometimes not at all what we expect. And that is what makes prayer so hard to do. So risky.

Prayer is risky, so we start small. If you don’t feel like you have enough faith to cure cancer, that’s okay. Start small. Pray for someone who has a cold. Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, suggests that we visualize Jesus placing his hands over a sick friend. Then, with the faith of child talking to a loving parent, we ask Jesus to bring healing.

We can practice prayer by praying, by taking small steps many times during the day. Some people listen to and speak with God at the beginning of every waking hour. They spend just a few minutes with God. A friend of mine remembers to pray by turning her watch upside down. When she glances at her watch, she remembers to pray. Others turn off the radio in the car. Driving time becomes prayer time.

Prayer is relationship with God. And like our earthly relationships, prayer has no quick formulas, no automatic guarantees. The beings involved are not robots, nor would we want that kind of relationship with God. We interact with the Creator of the universe. And the universe becomes renewed as we pray.

So ... taking the risk ... we pray, staring small, breathing deep—having faith.

God is there, with us, in our small acts of prayer.