

“Little Things That Mean Everything” A Sermon for The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

“And whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” — Matthew 10:42

It’s sadly true, I think, that in the sweep of great events, we can lose sight of the smaller things. In seeking to capture the breadth of the moment, we may miss its depth, its hidden meaning. We want so much to be part of the march of history that we neglect to see a ‘little one’ (which is to say another fellow creature) standing alone along the ‘parade route’—someone who may be seeking from us only a cup of cold water. In today’s Gospel, Jesus appears eager to correct this particular form of blindness. In doing so he reminds us of what being both a prophet and a disciple—not to mention a moral person—at its heart demands.

Jesus’ teaching comes at a most needful moment—during what will prove, I believe, a most promising time of social and political change. And it’s a teaching I’ve found confirmed recently by two very different sources. I’m often asked—and I often ask others—‘What are you reading?’ Right now I’m rereading the work of James Baldwin, an African-American author whose novels and essays, first written over sixty years ago, continue to influence writers and activists in the Black Lives Matter movement. The other source—not one writer but a tradition of writers, a whole body, in fact, of spiritual thought—comes from the Celtic world, in works (some of them) that are millennia old.

So what can a Black writer born in Harlem in twentieth-century America possibly have in common with scholars and hermits who lived on the far western fringes of Europe, at a time we still call the Dark Ages? What can these two distinct sources, seemingly worlds apart, tell us about the need to guard and nourish those ‘little ones’ among us? And how might they help us discover (or rediscover) some of those smaller, overlooked truths revealing the larger picture?

Let’s begin with the Celts. Their story describes a people very much at home with small things—from the tiny ‘beehive’ dwellings in which monks lived and worshipped, to the belief that the sacred Presence itself could be discerned in narrow ‘thin’ twilight spaces between earth and heaven. This belief also led them to see in small and simple, even menial, tasks a vital service of love for God and for all whom God loves. In his book, *The Celtic Way*, Ian Bradley writes: “Nothing was too trivial to be sanctified by prayer and blessing, whether it be dressing for the day’s work, milking the cow or damping down the fire at night.”

Likewise, no person was too small or insignificant not to deserve their attention. A marginalized and oppressed people themselves—pushed to the edges of a continent by more powerful empires—they could see Christ both “in quiet AND in danger,” Christ “in mouth of friend AND stranger.” So Saint David of Wales, on his deathbed, would urge his followers to “Keep to the faith and do the little things that you have heard and have seen me do.”

For James Baldwin, of course, his world was, and still is, not one lived under a foreign oppressor, but rather one that daily encounters the enemy among one’s own countrymen, in one’s fellow citizens. In his essay, “Notes of a Native Son,” he recalls his first coming to this realization, while at the same time trying to make peace with his own father’s conflicted legacy:

“When he died I had been away from home a little over a year. In that year I had had time to become aware of the meaning of all my father’s bitter warnings, had discovered the secret of his proudly pursed lips and rigid carriage: I had discovered the weight of white people in the world. I

saw that this had been for my ancestors and now would be for me an awful thing to live with and that the bitterness which had helped to kill my father could also kill me.”

The fear of being fatally marred by the hatred of others is a theme that pervades this essay and one that Baldwin would return to in nearly all of his writing and throughout his life. He came to know finally that, while he could never cure racism—and indeed racism may not BE curable—he could at least seek to rid himself of the bitterness, and the sense of despair, that it produces. “Hatred,” he said, “which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the one who hated and this was an immutable law.”

The ‘small thing’ that Baldwin turns to in order to fight this infection, the ‘little one’ he seeks to nourish, involves not a task or a prayer or even an act of charity. His ‘thin space’ is something much closer to him, in fact; and yet it is a strength and a gift as sustaining as any religious principle or credal claim. For it’s something that comes from within—something, he writes, that “begins in the heart.” And “it now had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair.”

I think those old Celtic saints would have understood perfectly what Baldwin is speaking about. They would have felt that same charge and that same hope. For they too would have known where the power lies, be it in wrestling with cosmic evil (for them a palpable force), or in confronting the very human weight of systemic wrong. God was as close to them as the waves on the sea, God’s voice as clear as birdsong in the morning. Yet they believed that Presence also dwelt in their hearts, as Baldwin imagines it must, just so one can survive.

The difference is, of course, that God wants us not just to survive but to live out God’s plan fully, with clarity and purpose, and with a close, intimate attention to the starving, parched world around us—a world in as much need of a cup of cold water as it has ever been. So we cannot forget, in times of great challenge and change such as these, the small, simple acts of kindness and of love that remain the beating heart of discipleship—as they are the heart of the promise of new life that we now pray for and march for and work for, and all in Christ’s name. Amen.

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +