Cobblestones

September 5th, 2021

There is a hill in the seaside town of Hakodate in Hokkaido that has a long cobblestone street. It is called Daisanzaka, and it is located in the Motomachi district. There are many old buildings there, including several beautiful churches. I always loved visiting this district when I was young. Not only did the churches make the space seem sacred, the cobblestones added something historical and enchanting to the atmosphere. Cobblestones are a wonderful thing—a very simple, inexhaustible technology that builds pathways for people to travel upon. The materials for cobbles and setts are readily available almost anywhere. Children like cobblestones because they have a storybook appearance; it is fun to count the setts or stones as you walk along. It is an example of how little things connect together and build bigger things, much as children play with blocks and build houses and cities. Our reading today invites us to consider little things. Jesus said: “‘Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?” (Luke 16:10-12). It will not be the first time I talk about little things. Not long ago I spoke of mustard seeds; Jesus told his disciples: “For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there”, and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.’” (Matthew 17:20-21). For the next couple of Sundays, I want to speak about hope—because hope endures and overcomes; it remains alongside faith and love (1 Corinthians 13:13). Hope is essential for our spiritual and physical health; it is integral to our way forward through the strange times we live in. And hope, like faith and love, begins with little things and being faithful in little things.

The words of Jesus might seem like a naïve, simplistic approach to reality. Our world is gigantic, our problems are gigantic, and we need gigantic solutions. I do not deny that our world is overwhelming. There are many days when it is easy to get lost. I have to repeat to myself: “Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). It is one, little truth that helps me face the sheer complexity of the world. Another cherished memory of mine relates to the office where my father worked when I was a child. One evening, I went over to the office to play and watch him work. Puffing away on his pipe, he was busy working a rather titanic, slow machine. It is the first machine I recall taking an interest in. It was a Japanese typewriter. Invented in 1915, the Japanese typewriter is very different from a western typewriter. Instead of managing 26 letters, you had to manage about 2400 characters. Typing was a slow, laborious process—it was impossible to do anything but hunt and peck. In the silence of his cold office, he would stand there, scanning the type, looking for the character he needed, and then punching it onto his sheet. I learned that the production of knowledge, of work even, begins with slow, silent, patient, hard work. One step at a time, one character at a time. Some years later, after everyone had moved on to computers and laptops, which greatly improved his work schedule, my mother found something interesting in an antique store, which she later gave to me. It was an old type box from a printer’s shop. I still have it on my desk. It reminds me of that early memory, of a now vanished world, which taught me a priceless lesson—life is composed of little building blocks. It is not naïve or simplistic—the world really is composed this way. You did not learn to read Shakespeare at one glance. Long before you read Shakespeare, you learned twenty-six little letters. And thus, I return to the building blocks of my life.

The little things of hope are tremendously practical. I remember watching Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Torn Curtain* when I was young. The great climax of the film is when Paul Newman pretends to show off his knowledge of physics before Ludwig Donath. The East German physicist shakes his head at the formulae Newman writes on the blackboard. Donath begins to write his own formulae on the blackboard. The viewer who is not a physicist wonders what is going on. Actually, the truth is very simple. Newman is not there to share information with Donath. Newman has a photographic memory. He is not there to impress; he is there to steal whatever Donath writes on the blackboard. What seems like a tense, mysterious situation is quite simple. One simple trick in a complicated spy game. For a person without advanced physics and mathematics, life can look like a blackboard covered with incomprehensible equations. And yet, even mathematics begins with very simple things. Algebra teaches us to break down equations into manageable parts to solve them. Though we might not always understand the full mystery of life, we can manage the smaller pieces that God entrusts to us; we can relate to them truthfully and faithfully. In the Parable of the Talents, nobody is judged for how many talents they were given in the first place—whether five talents, two talents or one talent. Not all of us are given equal opportunities, resources, or abilities; life can seem very unfair that way. And yet, God does not judge you for what you do not have. All God wants is for you to invest what you do, to play your part as faithfully as possible. The one who was only given two talents only made two more, but the Master says: “you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things” (Matthew 25:23). God did not call us to solve the riddle of the universe, to manage the world economy, or to end poverty and injustice on a worldwide scale. God is working on those things, and God invites us to play a part in those things, but God is calling us to be faithful in the things that are right before our eyes, in the things that He has entrusted to us—whether it is one, two, or five talents. Our gigantic world is made of atoms; our gigantic problems are made of smaller factors; our solutions are made of little actions, little events, maybe even little thoughts.

The longer I live, the harder it is for me to believe that little things are irrelevant. When you look at our complicated world, try to imagine it without one little thing, and see what happens. What would happen to the world if we removed only one category of plants—what if there were no nightshade plants (Solanaceae)? The world would look less beautiful, you might say. And that is true. And also, the world would not have the essential medicines hyoscine, atropine, scopolamine, or foods like tomatoes, potatoes, and eggplants. What about something smaller, something industrial? What if there were no screws? In his book *One Good Turn,* Witold Rybczynskidemonstrated the singular importance of the screw and screwdriver. Modern industry and science would be impossible without them—whether we are speaking of telescopes, microscopes, looms, printing presses, assembly lines, automobiles, or household carpentry. Remove the screw and screwdriver from the world, and you are back in the 12th Century. There are even small events in history that give birth to greater things much later on. One evening, over a thousand years ago, a child played a game and cried out: *“Tolle, lege!”*, inspiring Augustine to give his life to Christ (St. Augustine, *The Confessions*). A lightning storm scared a young Martin Luther and changed the course of his life, which played a key role in the Reformation. A moment of fear can put us on a path of courage. A random voice can lead us to something immeasurably priceless. God can even use little events that seem historically insignificant but become gigantically significant later on. Thousands of years ago, a young widow left her homeland in Moab and followed her mother-in-law on a desert road, going to work gleaning in the grain fields (Ruth 1). One refugee that nobody would have considered important, but she became the ancestor of King David and of Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew 1:5). Her pain and suffering, but also her faith and her hard work gathering ears of grain—contributed to the path of our salvation. At some point, some Roman soldier or slave took an axe and cut down a tree—a very simple act. And the wood from that tree became the cross on which the Saviour died to save the world.

To cherish the little things brings clarity, manageability, efficacy, but also beauty. Life should be beautiful. It is beautiful. The greater picture is even more beautiful when we consider the little pictures. One of my favourite poets, whom I have referenced before, is Kobayashi Issa. Issa lived a difficult, poor life. Sometimes, he was so broke, he only drank hot water—he had no tea. He became a poet out of necessity, and wandered thousands of miles throughout the country to earn his living. To begin with, haiku are small—they only have 17 syllables. Moreover, Issa wrote his small poems on small subjects. Insects and little creatures are a common theme. He wrote 1,000 poems about insects and smaller creatures: 54 on snails, 15 on toads, 200 on frogs, 230 on fireflies, 150 on mosquitoes, 90 on flies, 100 on fleas, and 90 on cicadas. Not many of us would consider mosquitoes or fleas worthy of poems, but Issa—who probably had ample experience with both in the hot summers of Japan—turned something irritating into something beautiful. Even in his moment of pain at the loss of his daughter, he considered the beauty of dewdrops and the beauty of the world, writing:

露の世は露の世ながらさりながら

Tsuyu no yo wa tsuyu no yo nagara sari nagara

This dewdrop world --

Is a dewdrop world,

And yet, and yet . . .

(Tr. Lewis Mackenzie)

And beauty has its practical side. Beauty trains us to hope and to grow and to build skills. The great composer Béla Bartók wrote a collection of musical pieces called *Mikrokosmos.* They begin very simply, almost like piano exercises for children—simple, minimalistic, and yet hauntingly meditative and beautiful. In the beginning, each piece is not much longer than a haiku. Gradually, the works become more and more complicated. It is as if Bartok is painting the landscape or roadway of music—the great world of beautiful music begins with minimal things, with small notes, which will eventually build into more sophisticated melodies and rhythms. It is a lot like how we learn piano—one note at a time, one bar at a time until we are ready for more. Even a novice piano player w0rking at the early pieces of *Mikrokosmos* is already making beautiful sounds. Our simple prayers and our actions make our lives beautiful; they make that beautiful habitat in which God is pleased to dwell. And where God dwells, God’s great work is done. Neither you nor I can convert anyone or change the earth. That is God’s work. Our work is to carry God. And by carrying God, we affirm and enable God’s great work in this world, through little and great things, through pain and through joy—one footstep at a time, one letter or word at a time, one prayer at a time, one day at a time.

All of these things—clarity, manageability, efficacy, beauty—work together to build hope out of the smallest things, the most seemingly insignificant things. Little things have immense value. Some of the most expensive things you can buy are useless little pieces of paper—stamps. The 1855 Treskilling Yellow sold for 2.6 million; the 1851 Baden Kreuzer Error sold for 1.31 million, and they are not the most expensive stamps in the world. Some of the oldest and most beautiful formal prayers of the church are tiny: *Kyrie eleison* and *Maranatha—*two Greek words and one Aramaic word. They mean “Lord save!” or “Lord have mercy!” and “Come Lord quickly!” Our Psalm 117 today is the shortest chapter in the Bible. Only thirty-one words. Thirty-one cobblestones of hope. A cobblestone road is beautiful. It is not smooth and easy like an asphalt road, but asphalt roads are tremendously laborious and costly to maintain. Throughout the Roman Empire, 80,000 kilometres of roads were stone-paved. Though many were replaced by asphalt, many miles of those stone roads still exist, and in some cases, the stones are merely being transferred to other roads. Cobblestones last. The little, hopeful things in your life will last and connect to other things that build the kingdom of God in your midst and in places you may never see. Our lives can be built on hope, and our life of faith is built on a very simple hope, a cornerstone that affirms the goodness of life and the goodness of the life to come—“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). That is thirty-seven words that proclaim an infinite hope.