

## NO SMALL BLESSINGS

A Sermon Preached by Cheryl M. Walker  
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I always find it interesting the reactions I sometimes get to my sermon titles. When I think of a title I have something in mind to preach about, but what that title means to me and what it means to other people can sometimes be very different, and at times lead to some amusing interpretations. This week's title *No Small Blessings* is one of those that have elicited some amusing reactions. One of my friends said -- that's right, no small blessings here, we only one big ones! Another asked if this was a subtle hint given that my birthday is just a few days away. To that last remark, I said why yes, yes it is.

So to clear up any confusion I'd like to begin with the true story of a person I know. I'll call him Bob, but that's not his real name. Bob grew up in a family of modest means, his father was a working man and the family never had a lot of money, but they scraped by. Every Sunday he and his family went to church, not this one, this story isn't about anyone here this morning, not unless Bob has traveled a distance to get here this morning. I didn't see him come in, but just in case let me check. Hey Rich, oops I mean Bob, are you here? Okay, so the guy's name is really Rich, but we'll call him Bob anyway.

Back to Bob's story. Like I said, growing up Bob attended his local church and while he wouldn't call himself a religious guy, he did have faith in God and in the goodness of the world. Bob didn't go to college, his family couldn't afford it, and he spent his youth working at a series of low paying jobs that were just good enough so that he could misspend most of his youth. But he eventually matured got married and had a couple of kids.

Then one day he came up with a great idea. A great business idea and having determination he went to work making his idea a reality. And it was a great idea. Soon he started accumulating all the trappings of wealth -- a big house, several cars, one them being a Porsche, great vacations; all the things he ever wished or hoped for growing up. And he counted his blessings and thanked God for making him a wealthy man. Big blessings.

And then he had another great idea, this one greater than the last one, except for one thing, it really wasn't such a great idea. But he staked everything he had on this idea. Slowly it all started to unravel. First the cars went, then the house and then he had to declare bankruptcy. He went from living in a small mansion to living in a studio apartment with his wife and two children, wondering where the next meal was going to come from.

One night after driving home in his used car, with a hole in the floorboard, he sat in front of his apartment building and cried and prayed. He had come to the lowest point in his life. He sat there and said to his God "Lord, I can't take this anymore. Its not the things so much as the look in my children's eyes when I come home night after night with barely enough for them to eat. And my wife has been so good through all of this, and I know she would never say it, but I can see the look of disappointment in her eyes too. And I can barely look myself in the mirror anymore.

How did I let this all happen? I just can't take it anymore God, I am at the end of my rope. If I don't win the lottery, then please just take my life away because I can't stand this anymore."

He sat in the car and cried some more and finally he got himself together enough to go inside. He trudged up the stairs and as soon as he opened the door his wife came running up to him and said "Honey, you'll never believe what happened, I bought a lottery ticket and we won!" Bob couldn't believe it! They won the lottery!

His wife said to him "I know we really couldn't afford it, but it was only a dollar, and I just had a feeling. And look we won. Isn't that great?! We won the lottery, we won fifty dollars!"

That is a true story. If you ask Bob he'll tell you that it was the best thing that could have happened to him. It all became clear. He was looking for a big blessing, fifty million dollars, but he got a small blessing, fifty dollars. But had he won fifty million he would have missed the point of a blessing altogether. There is no such thing as a small blessing; all blessings are big ones.

I love that story. When Bob told me his story I asked him if I could use it someday, and he told me not only could I but that I should. We talked about what that story meant to him. He realized that he had had the truly great blessings of life all along, but what he didn't have was the eyes to see them. It wasn't disappointment in his wife's eyes, it was concern, because she loved him she was worried about him. He realized that all along what he had was the blessing of someone who loved him dearly. It was the same for his children. They weren't worried about having all the toys they once had. They weren't worried about having just enough to eat, they were worried that daddy wouldn't come home one night. He realized that he had the blessing of children who loved him. And what he saw when he looked in the mirror wasn't a man who was a failure, it was a man who was too blind to see that he had the best life had to offer him -- he was alive, he was healthy and he was loved. What else could he have wanted? Bob understood for maybe the first time in his life that there is no such thing as a small blessing.

Bob never recaptured the wealth he once had. I don't think he ever really tried to get it all back. Somehow the cars and the houses and the fancy things didn't matter so much to him. He did start another business, he had a good idea this time. He and his family eventually moved out of the studio into a comfortable home. His kids grew up and are living good lives of their own and he is a grandfather. And to this day he thanks his God for the blessing of a fifty dollar lottery ticket.

I've been thinking about Bob's story a lot these days and I sometimes wonder where is Bob's God now? I look at the state of the world and wonder, where is the God who would let the world deteriorate the way it has? Where is the God the psalmist speaks of who will satisfy those who are thirsty and fill the hungry with good things? Where is the God who will deliver those who dwell in darkness and in gloom? Where is the God who will answer all who cry out in their times of oppression? Where is that God?

If God can give Bob a winning lottery ticket, then why can't everyone win a fifty dollar lottery ticket? In some places of the world and even to some people in this city, winning fifty dollars is like winning a thousand dollars. Why not just give everyone enough to eat and enough to drink? Why not just remove all oppressions? Why not take charge of the situation and fix it? If You're

such a great God with a steadfast love, hey just fix the problem like you fixed Bob's problem. Where's a miracle when you need one?

When we read Biblical stories and writings and hear of a God who brings the oppressed out of their despair we are often tempted to read them as God performing miracles. When Jefferson rewrote his Bible he took out all of the miracle stories. Emerson went so far as to say that the word miracle "as pronounced by... churches is a Monster"<sup>1</sup> Jefferson and Emerson both seemed to think of Biblical miracles as literally happening. Five fish feed five thousand, people are instantly healed just because God decides to show favor upon them and demonstrate God's steadfast love. And it is tempting to read it that way and ask the question -- so where are You now?

Liberals often read the Bible like fundamentalists except for different reasons. Fundamentalist read it literally and accept every word as the inerrant word of God. Liberals read it literally and reject it as mere fiction. But it's interesting that the Bible almost never says how any of these miracles actually happen.

When I think of that fact I think of Bob's story. On the surface it might seem that Bob's story is just a story of a God helping one person in their time of need. But when we really look at Bob's story we understand what Bob received wasn't fifty dollars, Bob received hope. Bob could see that as long as he was alive there was hope that his future could change. And not only could Bob receive hope, Bob could give it as well. If he could change his future, he could change some else's future as well. If he could receive a blessing, then he could be a blessing too. Rebecca Parker writes in her new book, *Blessing the World*, that a professor of hers once told her that we are given a choice in how we live -- we can be a curse or we could be a blessing to the world. He told her it was best to bless the world.

Yet, how can we be a blessing to the world if we cannot see that we have already received great blessings ourselves? My partner Elizabeth once remarked that New Yorkers love to complain. This was not earth shattering news. Every New Yorker knows that complaining seems to be our shared common language. It's how you can tell a native New Yorker. When asked if the glass is half full or half empty we're most likely to answer "well the glass looks a little dirty. And its not a very nice glass, where did you get that glass anyway? You know you could have bought a much better glass if you spent a little more? But glass breaks so why would you spend that much money anyway." And on and on we go. We know how to complain. I don't think this is a trait that is unique to New Yorkers but we make it an art form.

Maybe we all need to answer the half full glass in a different way, whether we are a Native New Yorker or not. When asked if the glass is half full or half empty perhaps the best answer is -- "hey if you have a glass, you're blessed. You could trade the glass for some food, and then share the food with someone. Not only are you blessed you could be a blessing too."

Every morning when we wake I think we need to remember Bob's story and be thankful that we woke up and have hope that the day will bring with it the chance to be a blessing to the world. And in our thinking of being a blessing we need to remember the title of this sermon *No Small Blessings*, because there are no small blessings. Whatever we might do to bless the world is no small thing to the person we bless and no small thing to this world.

Now, for sure, I can't tell you from where your blessings come. Some of you might believe they come from the steadfast love of God. Some might believe that all blessings are the works of human hands and waking up is just the luck of the draw. And some may believe in something somewhere in the middle. It doesn't really matter to me which belief you hold, it matters more to me what you intend to do with that belief. Our third principle speaks of the acceptance of one another and encouragement of spiritual growth. So while I may not hold the same belief that you hold as to the source of our blessings, I accept that difference gladly. It is your spiritual growth that interests me most. But only if that growth takes you to new places of being, beyond the search for higher personal enlightenment. If the goal of your spiritual growth is to be a blessing only unto yourself, then what kind of growth is that really? Being a blessing to the world, is the true path of spiritual growth.

When you leave this place today and return to your busy lives, as we all must, ask yourself two simple questions -- what blessings have I received today and how shall I bless the world. If you ask yourself those two simple questions everyday for the rest of your lives, your spiritual growth and fulfillment will increase moment by moment, day by day, year by year. Even if the answers seem distant some days and its hard to think of a blessing because life seems so hard. Or if it's hard to think of way of blessing the world because the world seems to need so much. If you ask yourself those questions you will find the answers. What blessings have you received and how are you blessing the world?

Think of Bob and his story. Think of some other story you've heard or even lived. Remember the days of sunshine and cool breezes. Think of the music of the your heart's content. Recall the smile of a dear friend, and the laughter shared when you had nary a care in the world. Feel again the first blush of young love, or old love or any love at all. Think about the smile you brought to some other person's eyes when you reached out and blessed them with your kindness. Sing a song of thanksgiving for the blessing of life itself at the dawning of the new day and keep the flame of hope burning brightly in your soul.

The glass won't look half empty, the glass won't look half full, you'll be happy to have a glass and you'll know that there are no small blessings.

Amen, Peace and many kind blessing to each of you.

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<sup>i</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo, The Divinity School Address as cited in "Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism", Conrad Wright, ed.