

Isaiah 60:1-5  
Ephesians 3:1-12

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## LIVING LARGE IN SMALL PLACES

*"Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for the ages in God who created all things."* *Ephesians 3:8-9*

I haven't read anything of Flannery O'Connor's writings for years, but I remember being captivated by her short stories when I was in college. A devoted Catholic Christian, Flannery O'Connor was often asked why she stayed in Milledgeville, Georgia, rather than joining the literary scene in New York City. O'Connor replied that, because she had some success in writing, she had to watch herself.

Her mother always invited friends over for tea on Wednesday afternoons. She wrote,

On Wednesday afternoons my main task is to sit like a lady on my mother's green sofa, right over the bad grease spot, covering it up. That is my main function. When that is your main function, it has a powerful impact on you of keeping you humble. That's good for a writer.

Another stellar Southern writer, Eudora Welty also experienced great success. She also was asked once why she refused to move from her native Jackson, Mississippi, up to the literary scene in New York City. Ms Welty, who happened to have on hand a copy of the local newspaper on the day that question was popped, picked it up and read to the inquirer the following headline: "Woman kills husband after Sunday School." She added, "Where on earth am I to get literary material like that if I were living in New York City?"

We don't have to look very closely at Jesus' life to notice how the vast majority of his influence and ministry took place in very ordinary surroundings: in small towns and villages, the market place, private homes, hillside fields and pasture lands, and on the road. As we discovered in an absorbing study of Mark's Gospel in our Inward Journey series last fall,

Jesus even repeatedly discouraged onlookers from broadcasting his success in healing people. And except for his childhood sojourn in Egypt, and pilgrimages to Jerusalem he seems never to have traveled more than forty miles from his home in Galilee, a region, for the most part about as culturally remote as Andorra or Bhutan. Like O'Connor and Welty, he found all the opportunities he needed to bloom with God's fragrance right where he had been planted, among the Galilean peasantry. Put another way, living large in small places.

Life in today's "too much information" age can leave our heads as jammed as a cargo hold full of unlabeled baggage. The evening news stacks up relentless problems: the death toll in Iraq; the cost of fossil fuels—now both Mexico (a major U.S. supplier) and Iran say their wells are running dry; the crisis in American education; global warming. And because we live increasingly globally dependent lives, we find ourselves in a state of lingering stress, with a background white noise of anxiety that we feel powerless to address.

The fallacy, of course, is assuming that my one vote in advocacy of something I hold important is of no account, because it is so small. But consider these events:

- In 1800 Thomas Jefferson was elected President by one vote in Congress after a tie in the electoral college;
- Similarly, Andrew Jackson lost by one vote to John Quincy Adams;
- Alaska was purchased from Russia by a one vote margin;
- And in 1941 the U.S.A.'s Lend Lease aid program that supplied [Great Britain](#), the [Soviet Union](#), [China](#), [France](#) and other [Allied nations](#) with vast amounts of war matériel between 1941 and 1945—without which Germany (and perhaps Japan) may very well have prevailed in World war 2—passed Congress by . . . *one vote*! Had it not passed, I'm confident I would not be alive.

And let's not forget Jesus' one vote for humanity, including for our children and theirs, a vote he exercised from the cross even his closest followers voted against him with their feet. God's unerring message is that you do count. Merely saying that we do count, however, can be an empty aphorism unless we invite opportunities for that message to become lodged in our own actions, thereby demonstrating how God's grace works through us. Diogenes Allen puts it this way:

The point at which the life of God intersects our own is not to be found in the realm of power, but in the realm of goodness; not in deeds of force, but in acts of

humility. It is easy enough to confuse the two, as when we speak of a powerful human being as Godlike.

David Hume, the monumental philosophical thinker, made that error, disparaging the impotence that he saw in the Christian view of the lowly, suffering Son of God, as did Nietzsche a century later. The preacher Maurice Boyd answered Hume by recalling the scene in Melville's *Moby Dick* when Captain Ahab of the Pequod rages at God saying that it is only when the almighty comes to us in the *lowest* form of love that we are able to receive God. He writes:

When the Pequod is caught in a violent storm and is illuminated from bow to stern in a supernatural light, Captain Ahab screams his hostility to[ward] overwhelming omnipotence, and his hospitality to power of another sort.

"I know thee, Thou clear Spirit, and I know that proper worship is defiance! Come to me as a power and there is that here which to the last gasp of this earthquake life [I] will resist Thee. But come in Thy lowest form of love, and I will kneel and kiss thee.

He was right.

The Church, which over the centuries often put so much stock in a fearful, threatening deity, often did so at the risk of losing its own soul. But when God steals into the intimate places of the soul, enlarging a local passion to be creative and compassionate, great moments are born in small places, often by very ordinary people.

For example, U.S. Marine Captain Rye Barcott, is one such good soul. Barcott has spent months under stress in Iraq's tormented streets. "It's enormously draining," he admits. "Outside the wire the enemy is faceless."

Yet whenever he was on furlough, he swapped one war zone for another. While he was a student at UNC Chapel Hill, he visited one of the worst poverty zones on the planet, a slum called Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya, east Africa. 700,000 poverty stricken people are jammed there into an area the size of New York's Central Park, where deep tensions among rival gangs have already erupted into riots.

Barcott gave up his comfortable North Carolina home to turn the slum shacks into a medical center and youth center. Now he has rival gangs cleaning the streets, and playing soccer on a dirt lot. But each team is made up of young men from rival gangs. "If you want to win, as most kids do," says Barcott, "you have to learn to trust your team-mates, who might be enemies off the field."

Now a Marine reserve, Barcott keeps frequent contact with his young Kibera slum friends in Kenya, while studying for his MBA at Harvard's J. F. Kennedy School of Business.

Then, there's Laura Moore, who founded an oasis for severely ill foster children in Georgia. Children who depend on so much care and special equipment that they are often impossible to place in foster homes. So, many finish up languishing in overburdened hospitals for months or years for want of a home. Moore, a pediatric nurse for twenty-three years, determined to do something about it.

"I had one teenager," she said, "who told me, 'If I were a dog, you'd put me to sleep.'"

She thought, what a hopeless, awful perspective. A teenager's life should be full of life and hope. So she had a dream to make a home for these kids.

She and her family adopted one girl, Katie, who needed a rare transplant—five organs at once. It was doubtful that she'd survive. After the transplant the organs failed, and she needed another five. Laura Moore determined to care for her at home with her husband and daughter. Now Katie is doing exceptionally well.

Nor has Laura given up on her larger dream: she's secured a twenty-three acre ranch on which to establish a home and center for the kids.

Living large in small places. What we have and where we are, is always enough to do something extravagantly good, in Jesus' name. Amen