

Sermon for Ash Wednesday: “Tiny Things”

Olivia Hamilton
Cincinnati, Ohio

“I never knew how much I liked tiny things, ’til I saw a ladybug sittin’ on a jellybean.

Yesterday a little baby winked at me, she had this tiny spoon, she was eatin’ tiny peas.

A million tiny raindrops make the river high, so tiny things are mighty things. I guess that’s why, I like tiny things.”

From the song “Tiny Things” by the band Cody (The “Helpster” soundtrack)

Author and podcaster Kendra Adachi coins a term I find comically useful in this Lenten season: “big black trash bag energy.” Determined to reform our lives (albeit overzealously), so many of us barge into Lent with a sort of bullish energy. We are ready to make big shifts and lasting changes! Aiming to construct new habits or de-activate old ones, our spiritual senses are on high-alert as we seek to strip our lives of that which might get in the way of holy living. Rather than appreciating the slow and steady work of lasting change, it seems easier at times to chuck all our worn-out ways of being and start again from the ground up. In a world where habit-tracking apps comprise a multi-billion dollar industry, and where spiritual practices can become another task to check off a daily to-do list, I wonder instead: what is the smallest step that I can take, today, to move closer to God’s love? What is the micro-movement of the Spirit that might be stirring in me that can nudge the needle away from self-centeredness and toward a more complete compassion? Far beyond the worlds of SMART goals and the promise of a “better me,” this season can serve as an invitation to honor the goodness inside, and to build strategically and steadily upon what’s already going well in our lives.

To be sure, there are ways of being that demand reformation. We are all capable and culpable when it comes to sin—and yet, the sort of radical cleansing that many of us seek is not only self-abasing, but counterproductive in the grand scheme of personal transformation. The God of our belief, revealed in the still small voice, the faith of a mustard seed, and the person of Jesus who invites the little ones to come unto him, is a God who seeks our repentance. So too, I am sure that God sees and is pleased with our micro-movements toward wholeness which, over time, accumulate and compound to produce a life of sturdy discipleship. If in our desire to repent and transform we aim to become someone other than *who God has made us to be*, I fear that rather than seeing our own capacity for goodness and reconciliation, we’ll be caught up in a sort of spiritual imposter syndrome. In this place, where transformation takes on an all-or-nothing quality, we are unable to see with clarity the compas-

sion that God has for us as we try, fail, and try again to center love in our lives. In this black and white space (either I can achieve change or I completely fall off the wagon) we can lose sight of the holiness of the gray area and the way that God is often revealed more so in the process of becoming than anywhere else in our journey of spiritual self-actualization.

Prevailing economic wisdom holds that bigger is better, that the accumulation of wealth is to be prized and prioritized over and above the needs of communities and people. Far too often, even our altruistic pursuits mimic this sort of “growth at all costs” mentality, and we fail, repeatedly, to explore what the smallest next step toward interconnectedness might be. In my own context, where I minister to the needs of foster and adoptive families, it’s easier at times to say “we aim to radically reform the child welfare system,” than it is to enter into real and right relationship with families in crisis in my own neighborhood. “Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell” declared ecological philosopher Edward Abbey. We are prone to miss the forest for the trees if our goals for spiritual and relational transformation don’t begin with the minimum viable first action toward repentance and reconciliation. Rarely is this action particularly noteworthy at a glance, and certainly not newsworthy. Rather, honoring our own dignity and the dignity of others often simply looks like showing up, listening to one another, and being willing to be transformed by what we hear.

Can our churches and communities be holdouts of minimum viability in a cultural milieu that suggests more is always better? Can our quests for transformation begin not with self-berating but with a sort of humble openness to one another and to the possibility of tiny actions being transformative over time? Can our belonging within the Body of Christ equip us to reject the politics of disposability, and can it inspire us toward the impulse to see one another as co-laborers in the field rather than competition for scarce resources? Furthermore, if we live in this season as though tiny things matter and small is beautiful, what kind of spiritual transformation might take place? Ultimately, the sort of guidance we need to live lives of discipleship in a “bigger is better” world will not come from science, technology, or economics. Our resistance to this growth mindset must necessarily be spiritual. Just as following in the way of the Cross begins with a single step, so too our lives of discipleship come to life when we stop seeing big change and seismic shifts as the goal and begin to see that what is done in a small way with great love is perhaps the most noble action of all.

“A million tiny raindrops make the river high.” When it comes to attempting to repair the breach that sin has caused, so often our actions can become outsized and performative. You have my permission to put away the big black trash bags and take the single next right step. You have my permission to rid yourself of the pressure to do and be all things, and instead to embrace the micro-moments that pave the way for true and lasting reconciliation, in Jesus’s name! *Amen.*