

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“THE POWER AND SCOPE OF OUR INFLUENCE”
John 6:1-15
July 26, 2009
10:00 A.M. SERVICE

The transforming power of Christ is the world's ultimate hope. In him the ordinary becomes extraordinary. Where his spirit of unselfish love and undying hope appear, the world is transformed into a new creation.

One domino can start a panorama of excitement and beauty. This involves weeks of setting up thousands of dominos. It also requires an arena-sized space where the domino creations can be protected until the day, with t.v. cameras rolling, the first domino is tipped. One small motion and a masterpiece of falling dominos is created.

Only God knows and only time will tell what magnificent things can develop from one simple deed! Everything begins small, but faith the size of a mustard seed, said Jesus, can move mountains. Our task as Christians is to do whatever we can to show the love of Christ, trusting God with the outcome.

Just a few years ago Malcolm Gladwell wrote what became an exceedingly popular book called ***The Tipping Point***. The book's thesis is that fads, fashion trends, and other “**social epidemics**,” including crime waves, spread in the same way viruses do. Somewhere in the background of an idea, a fad, or a disease there is what appears to be an insignificant single event that turns out to be the “**tipping point**,” beyond which an “**epidemic**” occurs virtually overnight.

The Tipping Point is a fascinating variation on an old theme that “**mighty things from small beginnings grow.**” (Dryden) This is nowhere better illustrated than in Jesus' famous miracle of the feeding of the five

thousand. This is the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four Gospels. It marked a breakthrough in Jesus' Galilean ministry. The miracle continued to be important in the Early Church, partly because of its ties to similar feeding miracles in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially 2 Kings 4:42-44, where Elisha fed one hundred people with twenty barley loaves. But the Early Church also associated the miracle with the Lord's Supper and interpreted it as representing Jesus' sufficiency in meeting human needs even when the resources of his followers are small. What a powerful lesson for the church?

The exact location of this event is difficult to determine, but we know it was near the Sea of Galilee on a mountain. There Jesus had sat down in order to teach his disciples when he saw a great multitude of people coming to him. The Gospel writer says the Passover was at hand, yet here were several thousand people coming to Jesus instead of going to Jerusalem. This is thought by some to be a symbolic reference meaning that Jesus was to be the true Passover sacrifice. How could such a throng of people be fed? Philip said that a year's wages would not be enough for each of them to have a piece of bread. Andrew found a boy with five barley loaves and two fish, and with this small lunch Jesus fed everyone and there were twelve baskets of leftovers. A miracle indeed! We know that in Jesus' hands the things we truly need are available in abundance, more than enough for each one of us.

What we have just said represents the clear meaning of this event. The Gospel writers are obviously recording what we are to understand as a miracle, one of Jesus' "*mighty works.*" Some readers, however, have been drawn to another explanation and a different meaning of this famous event. For some of these this unorthodox interpretation has the advantage of eliminating the miraculous or supernatural element of the story. Even for those who have no trouble embracing the miraculous core of the story, this interpretation can be inspirational and instructive.

The proponents of this interpretation suggest it is highly unlikely that five thousand people - - minus one, and that one a child - - would have left home for such an outing without taking something to eat. Perhaps no one had more than a small amount of food and did not see it as enough to share with anyone, much less several thousand. Perhaps they were afraid of losing what they had, thinking, "**If someone finds out that I have something to eat, they will take it away from me.**" But when a mere child offered his simple lunch to Jesus, this became a tipping point. People were moved to

offer what they had, as well. When everyone contributed what they had, it was more than enough for everyone.

Naturally, there are problems with this interpretation. But think about the point it makes. Consider how often in the Gospels we read of Jesus calling people to unselfish sharing and to generosity. Jesus challenges the rich young ruler to sell what he has and give it to the poor. The transformed Zaccheus says, ***“Half of my goods I will give to the poor.”*** The disciples remembered Jesus saying, ***“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”*** Jesus praised the poor widow who gave only two pennies because she gave all she had. Think also how Jesus praised children. He said unless we become like children we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. He said the greatest in the kingdom of heaven will be those who humble themselves like a little child. The **“unorthodox”** interpretation of the famous miracle certainly reflects and supports the spirit of Christ and of the redeemed community.

If the thesis of *The Tipping Point* is true, we must reevaluate some of our assumptions about our influence in the world. Because the culture gives priority to quantitative values, we find ourselves increasingly impressed with wealth, statistical achievements, and celebrity. We may have grudgingly accepted the likelihood that we won’t win the lottery, or set any world records, or be pursued by the paparazzi, but we may not have found other sources of meaning and a sense of worth. This is one of the many places where our faith can help us.

Ultimately quality always trumps quantity, Mr. Trump and others to the contrary notwithstanding. Think of where you have found genuine joy. Was it in a crowd, or with one special person? Was it when you had all the money you needed, or when you realized how little money mattered? Was it when you finally got something you wanted, or when you saw gratitude in the eyes of someone else? Our Lord asks, ***“What if you gain the whole world and lose your soul?”*** Our Lord insists, ***“Loving God and loving your neighbor is all that really matters.”*** Our Lord says, ***“When you have done it to one of the least of these, you have done it to me.”***

We must stop minimizing the power and scope of our influence. Your next small act of kindness, your next simple gift of yourself, your next moment of true generosity could be a spiritual tipping point - - whether you ever know it or not.

Renowned theologian Reinhold Niebuhr occasionally preached during the summer at a little church in Heath, Massachusetts. Once, a worshipper asked him about a prayer he had used, and Niebuhr gave him the piece of paper on which he had written the prayer. Since that moment the prayer has traveled around the world and has become perhaps the best-known of all modern prayers. **“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”** What significant things can come from unlikely beginnings!

There is great strength in unity. A united family can weather every storm. A united congregation can heal every division. A united world could solve every human problem. Human beings joined together can make miracles happen. I invite you to become a miracle worker. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.