

The Little Things
A Christmas Story
I Corinthians 1:26-31 CEV
Christmas Eve, 2016
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
Pastor Dave Carver

I met Wayne Barker in an unusual place. I had stopped to fill my tank and I looked across the parking area at the service station and I saw an enormous man crawling around on his knees. I wandered over to see if I could help, and he was muttering to himself... using mostly words that are not common in church. I asked if there was a problem and he looked up and said, "Yeah, I think. I mean, I don't know if there's a real problem or not but that little screw cap from my tire fell while I was adding air, and now I can't find it. Why do they make those things black anyway? Isn't every gas station parking lot in the world black? And they are so small!"

So because I didn't want to appear insensitive, I gave the area at least a cursory glance, but it was so rainy that I was relieved when he stood up and said, "Sheesh. Forget about it. I'm sick of these pebbles grinding into my knees, and besides, I must have some sort of slow leak. I'll get a new one when I get the tire fixed."

Perhaps like a lot of big guys, Wayne isn't good at little things. If you were to see his dresser at home, you'd see that it's covered in an ocean of "small". Pennies and paper clips, loose keys and nuts and bolts are heaped in piles, waiting for someone to be attentive.

Wayne Barker is a "big thing" guy. In his work as a heavy equipment operator, he lives in an oversized world.

The tires are bigger, the holes are deeper, the sounds are louder... and all of that is OK with Wayne.

When he's not moving huge piles of dirt with enormous machines, Wayne is shaping trees into objects of beauty. The day I met him the back of his truck was filled with rough-hewn maple. He told me he was on his way home to spend the weekend turning that wood into a queen-sized rocking chair.

You see, his only daughter, Megan, was pregnant. With twins. He had already made a special crib for her – it was, essentially, a “double wide”. There were two sides, and space for two mattresses, but the babies would be able to reach through and touch each other if they wanted to. He hadn't planned on making a rocker, but he was fed up with what he called “discount store cheapies”, and apparently he'd been to Megan's home twice already to measure the doorways. He wanted to make sure he was building the absolute biggest chair that could fit into her home.

When Wayne starts something, he's all in. That would explain why he didn't leave the house after he got home that Friday afternoon. He was building. Cutting. Sanding. Joining. Making the world's greatest daughter - the world's most important mom-to-be - the best rocking chair in the history of furniture.

But at about 4 on the following Monday morning, his plans went awry. He was awakened by a call from his panicked son-in-law, who simply said, “We're at the hospital. Get here as soon as you can.”

Wayne flew out the door and was immediately confronted by a flat tire on his pickup. Evidently the leak we'd seen on the previous Friday had gotten worse over the

weekend, and the vehicle was not drivable. He let out an involuntary scream (again, using language I'll not repeat here). At that moment, his neighbor arrived home from his shift as a taxi driver. When Wayne explained the situation, the man immediately said, "Get in!"

That made Wayne a little uncomfortable, because he'd never really spoken to his neighbor before. He was from India, or Pakistan, or Bangladesh or somewhere, and he was a Muslim, or a Hindu, or a Sikh, or something. Wayne had always thought of him as being odd, and yet here he was going out of his way to help.

When they got to the hospital, Wayne pulled out his wallet but the neighbor waved him off, saying, "This? This is a little thing. Go inside. Go!"

When he got inside, he was, himself, smaller than he'd ever been. There were lights and noises and people rushing in and out. Wayne didn't understand everything, but what he did understand scared him to death. Apparently there was a problem with the blood flow to the babies, and unless they did something, at least one of them would die before it had a chance to be born.

His daughter told him that they were going to do something called Laser Ablation. Using an impossibly skinny needle, the medical team inserted a small laser right into Megan's womb, where they re-arranged some of the blood vessels using a laser beam shot from inside the needle.

When Wayne saw the size of the camera, and the laser, and the babies in the womb, he couldn't believe his own eyes. How could something so small be so amazingly

important? More than that, how could something that little do anything worth doing?

I'm happy to tell you that the surgery was a success and Megan was able to leave the hospital a few days later with nothing more than a band-aid on the outside and, more importantly, two increasingly healthy children on the inside. The babies were able to develop normally for another four weeks until she went into labor and delivered them last month – six weeks early.

Wayne got his tire repaired, and then he took his first step in learning the lessons of littleness by crossing the street and properly introducing himself to, and then thanking, his neighbor. And he has been in the neonatal intensive care unit every evening to hold his grandchildren. They are so little that he can easily hold one in each hand – or he would if the nurses would let him get away with it. For five weeks, he has marveled at their size and remembered how frightened he was the day of the procedure.

Of course, when he holds the children in the NICU, the nurses come by and offer comments about how big they are getting (which, of course, they are, compared to the other babies in that unit)... and when he shows photos to anyone at work, the constant comment is, “oooooh! Look how little!” (which, of course, they are, in comparison to everyone else’s grandchildren).

So these days, when he’s at work with his big equipment doing big jobs, Wayne Barker notices little things that are simply crucial. The other day, he observed how a tiny sliver of metal called a cotter pin that costs pennies and can be bent with his bare hands is absolutely essential to holding the bucket on his backhoe. He thought about it again while he fished around in his pocket for the key that

started up the earth grader. Even in the hospital cafeteria, he noticed that he had a huge bowl of soup that was vastly improved by a few grains of salt.

Wayne isn't at the hospital tonight, though. The babies are coming home on Monday, and all of these big thoughts about little things have brought Wayne to worship.

Here's what I mean: for most of the past 33 years, Christmas has been BIG for Wayne and his family. He's the guy who bought those giant stuffed bears. You couldn't get into his living room once the tree was set up because he chose the biggest, fattest tree he could find. And when it came time for dinner, well, Wayne didn't think it was worth eating if the turkey was less than 24 pounds.

And yet, this year, he can't take himself away from the smallness of it all. Tonight, he is filling his heart, mind, and spirit with thoughts of littleness. Thoughts of one star, twinkling in the murky depths of space. One child, coming to reveal the whole heart of God to humanity. One candle, beating back the darkness in defiance of the drafts. One congregation, trying to live in ways that will change the world.

Up until now, Wayne Barker hasn't had time for the littleness of Christmas. All of that has been nonsense to him – that is to say, it made no sense at all. And maybe, tonight, it still is nonsense.

But this is what he knows: that tonight, four miles away the heart of his heart is beating double time because something amazingly and improbably small had come in and changed reality.

And tonight, for either the first time or the hundredth time, he gets it. He understands what the Lord was saying to the prophet Zechariah all those years ago:

Then he said to me, "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts... For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel... (Zechariah 4:6,10)

Although that's an obscure book, it had always caught Wayne's eye because Zerubbabel was a builder – and he took some grief from others on account of the fact that he seemed to always start slow and start small. But lately, it seemed to Wayne, that starting slow and starting small might just be the way that God likes to operate.

So tonight, Wayne is trying to get in touch with the littleness and the subtlety and even the weakness for which the Almighty seems to have an affinity. He's lighting his candle, dusting off his hope, and trying to get ready for the changes that need to take place... in him... in his neighborhood... and in his world.

It's a little thing. But maybe, just maybe, there's no better time than Christmas for the little things.