

# The Main Thing

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 7 July 2019

II Kings 5:1-4; Psalm 30, Galatians 6:7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20.

When Phil Hansen was in high school, he developed a tremor in his dominant hand. He was an aspiring artist. As a teenager, he had become obsessed with pointillism. This is a method in visual art that breaks down big images into tiny points of color and light. He made beautiful drawings out of thousands of tiny dots. The constant movement required to make the dots damaged the nerves in his hands. By the time he finished high school, he could not draw a straight line. His dreams of being an artist were over and for several years he simply quit.

But one neurologist he saw gave him good advice. “Why don’t you embrace the shake,” he said. That’s also the title of the TED talk where he tells his story. The goal, he realized, wasn’t pointillism or a particular art technique. The goal was art. He could still be an artist. He could even still be an artist interested in tiny fragments that make up the larger whole. Once he reclaimed his vision of himself as artist, he got interested in the process of creativity itself, which he believes thrives in the presence of limits. He realized he wasn’t a pointillist. He was an artist.

Naaman had a similar moment of clarity. He almost missed out on a cure. He almost stormed away because Elisha had not shown him the kind of respect a man in his position deserved.

But his servants helped him remember why he was there. He had not made this journey to be fawned over by a prophet. The goal was a cure for his skin disease. So even though it sounded absurd to him, he dipped himself seven times in the Jordan River, the river the Israelites had crossed to enter the Promised Land. When Naaman got out of the water, “his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy.”

Jesus had similar advice for the disciples. He had sent them out two by two on the adventure of a lifetime, to reap the harvest of God’s kingdom. They were to travel without provisions and without an itinerary. Just go and be faithful and tell everyone you meet that the Kingdom of God is near. When they returned, they were thrilled by what they had done. In the name of Jesus, even the demons had submitted to them.

“That’s great,” Jesus said. “I saw it. Satan fell. You can do anything.” But displays of mighty power, as exciting as those may be, were not the goal. “Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

This is one of those parts of the Bible that we probably should not take literally. Don’t run outside and step on snakes and scorpions. Jesus was describing the disciples’ confrontation with evil, which does so often wear us out and wear us down. The disciples had had some success, which was encouraging to them. Jesus was clear they should not be afraid of the evil powers of this world. The authority of Jesus rested in them and they would not be harmed by the struggle. But Jesus also said don’t focus there. The battle against evil would be long and hard fought and there would be days that did not go so well. So do not rejoice at your own success. Focus instead on God’s eternal salvation. The image is of a big book in heaven inscribed in permanent ink. Focus on

God's favor and love for you, which are things you cannot lose. Rejoice not in what you can do but in what God has already done to save and rescue and redeem. Keep your eyes on the prize.

Leadership guru Steven Covey used to put it this way: "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." It's good advice. How often do we miss out on a larger goal because we fail to keep the main thing the main thing?

We forget the main thing in our personal lives. We work hard to care for our families and don't take time to care for our families. "When you coming home, Dad?" "I don't know when" But we'll get together then. Or we fail to protect our health or our relationships or our resources or our values. We struggle to keep the main thing the main thing.

People sometimes forget the main thing in charitable work. As just one case in point, Wynnton Neighborhood Network, housed here at St. Thomas, is having a record year. The food pantry is busier than ever. You all gave very generously in June to get the pantry through a financial crisis it was facing this summer and we should all be proud of that. But we should not throw a party to celebrate that the pantry is feeding more families this year than ever. That is sad news, not good news. Our goal is not a busy food pantry. Our goal is to end hunger and poverty in our community. That's the main thing.

Independence Day is a time to remember our main thing as a nation.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." The goal of the American experiment is not simply a robust economy, or meritocracy where some can get ahead. It is life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all, not for some. The founders did not extend this vision to women, enslaved people, or men who did not own property, so we've had to expand their horizon. But we know this nation is good enough to seek good for all. *Let mortal tongues awake, let all that breathe partake. Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light.* These are prayers to put into practice. These hymns remind us to keep the main thing the main thing.

Even in the church, we sometimes lose sight of the main thing. St. Thomas is growing, which is wonderful news for this community, and we will keep working to reach out to all. But the point of being the Church is not to pack the pews. It is to change the world around us. We bring people in so that we can all be sent out to love and serve the Lord.

Keeping the main thing the main thing looks easy but it is usually very hard. Dipping seven times in the Jordan was simple enough. All Naaman had to do was wade in the water. But it was a hard task for this proud commander. Naaman had to listen to a servant girl and go to his boss and ask for a favor. He had to return to a place he had conquered and ask for help. He had to admit that perhaps Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, were not in fact better for this sort of thing than all the waters of Israel. He had to turn aside from his privilege and allow someone he thought beneath him to teach him something. This was not an easy trip to the river.

That is why so many of us struggle to keep the main thing the main thing. We get distracted by pride or busyness or a need to be right. We do things simply because we have always done them. We lose sight of whether they are really helping us. We fall into unexamined habits that elevate custom over effectiveness.

But healing comes when we keep the main thing the main thing. When we remember the people and the values we care about the most. When we focus on how to help people over the long haul and not just in the immediate moment. When we remember our highest ideals as a country. When we remember why we are the church.

Naaman remembered what was most important. He wanted to be cured more than he wanted to be fawned over. So he did exactly what Elisha told him to do, and he was healed.

Phil Hansen's hand, by contrast, never got better. He still has a tremor, but he is also a working artist. He often makes art that is designed to be destroyed because the goal is the creative process itself. He was not cured. But he still found healing.

We come here each week to be healed. In touching the water at the font and taking the bread and the wine we remember who we are and whose we are and how to live that out.

*O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection.*

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Phil Hansen's TED Talk is at [https://www.ted.com/talks/phil\\_hansen\\_embrace\\_the\\_shake?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/phil_hansen_embrace_the_shake?language=en).

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