

GOING FOR BROKE

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

March 17, 2013

Each one of our lives, I believe, have moments when we encounter someone or something that is so marvelous or magnificent or beautiful or unexpected that for a moment we are overwhelmed. We are overwhelmed by a sense of grandeur and glory. *Grandeur and glory.*

I can remember, as if it were yesterday, the day when my father took me to my first major league baseball game. I was ten years old and he took me down to the old Tiger Stadium in Detroit. Now we were not Tiger fans, my father and me. We were Cardinal fans. But the Tigers in 1968 had a pitcher named Denny McClain and he was winning just about every game he was pitching. He won 31 games that year – still a record for wins in a season. My father wanted to treat me to a little history so he took me down to see Denny McClain pitch. It was a day game. The sky was blue, the temperature was warm. I had on my hand my baseball glove which I was planning to use to catch the dozens of balls I was sure were going to be hit straight to me. Now I had played a lot of baseball, sandlot and Little League. And I had watched a lot of baseball on TV. But I had never been to a Major League park. And I can remember, as I said, like it was yesterday walking up the ramps of Tiger Stadium up to the upper deck and when we got to our section and walked through that little tunnel to the seats – I can remember opening up before me the grandeur of the ball park. Something like I had never seen. Stands that reached into the sky. Grass as green as an emerald. The infield manicured as with a comb. Baselines straight and brilliant white. Outfield walls a million miles away. The murmur of the crowd. The bark of the peanuts vendor. My heart leaped and for a moment I was nearly overcome by the glory.

Now I know that if you are not a baseball or sports fan, or never been to a professional stadium like that – it may be hard for you to identify with this young baseball fan's experience. But I know somewhere along the way you have had those kind of moments. I had the same kind of experience when I heard for the first time Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. Or when I read Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Or when I

saw for the first time the Grand Canyon. Or when I fell in love with my wife. Or witnessed the birth of my child. Moments of grandeur and glory that enwrap you ... and that you are inclined never to forget. I didn't want that baseball game to end. I didn't want *Adagio for Strings* to end. I didn't want *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* to end. I didn't want my time at the Grand Canyon to end. And my family means more to me with every passing day.

C. S. Lewis calls these moments of grandeur and glory – Joy. This is what joy is – when you are lost in the marvelous, the magnificent, the beautiful, the unexpected and the overwhelming. And it is in these moments, Lewis tells us, that we know that there really is something else to this world. Something behind and beyond what we have experienced. Something marvelous, magnificent, beautiful, overwhelming that lies as the source of these moments of grandeur and glory. Joy is when you finally see, if only for a moment, what the world is really about.

We have been reading together through the Gospel of John this Lenten season. Some of you have made it through once and are your way through it again. Others of you are taking a more deliberate pace. But we are all far enough along to notice that the way John tells Jesus' story – is through a series of encounters and conversations he has with a wide assortment of individuals. There is Sanhedrin member Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night. There is the woman from Samaria who comes to Jesus at the well. There is the blind man whom Jesus heals. There is the woman caught in adultery dragged before Jesus. There is the dead man Lazarus who gets raised to life. There is Pilate who can't seem to find any fault in the beaten rabbi. There is Peter who gets pulled aside by the resurrected Christ and asked, "Do you love me?" Over and over in John's Gospel we get introduced to these common, ordinary people who are drawn into the presence of Jesus and the encounter provokes something from within them. They see something in Jesus that is either marvelous or magnificent or beautiful or overwhelming and they are evoked into some kind of response. Lazarus comes to life. Nicodemus breaks rank with the religious rulers. Peter begs Jesus to wash every inch of him. The Samaritan woman risks conversing with this Jewish rabbi. Each of them take these leaps of faith, as it were, because they have had this moment of grandeur and glory. They have caught a glimpse of joy. They have finally seen what the world is really about.

So all this helps us to understand the story we read this morning from John's twelfth chapter when Jesus pays a visit to the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Two sisters and a brother. Now what we know is that in the chapter before Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead. He has brought a man to life. And now he is visiting the man and his two sisters in their home. A week or so before these two sister were weeping and wailing at the tomb of their dead brother. A week or so ago Jesus was weeping before the tomb of his best friend. No one could imagine that these four would be together again. Jesus with Mary and Martha and Lazarus. And John tells us that Mary saw something. She saw something that maybe the others weren't seeing. She saw glory ... she saw grandeur. She saw her brother with life in him and she saw the man who had brought him to life. And they only thing she knew to do was find the most expensive thing she was ever going to own ... the thing that was supposed to last her her whole long life ... the thing that she might very well have retired on ... or fed the town with – and she bathed and showered Jesus with it. Chanel No. 5 all over the rabbi from Nazareth. She took all the chips and placed them on him. Because of course she had to. She just had to. Because she had the joy. She saw the glory. She was seized by the grandeur. She knew that this is what the world was really about. Resurrection. Life. Goodness. Truth. Eternity. It was all there and she was doubling down. She was going for broke.

Now the truth is all throughout the story of Jesus there all sorts of wagers taking place. People betting with him or people betting against him. The disciples drop their nets and wager for him. The Pharisees cling to their Torah and bet against him. The woman at the well pushes her chips toward him. The Roman procurator folds his hand and gives into the crowd. Nicodemus throws his lot with the Nazarene rabbi. And the soldiers underneath the cross cast their lots for what they think is a criminal's coat. Everyone is making a bet. Everyone is casting a vote on whether they think that what the rabbi says or what the rabbi does is what the world is about.

And that's not just in the Bible. Everyone of us is making a bet, aren't we? Because the great wager of life ... the great wager of living is deciding on what you think life is really about. What am I aligning my life around? Because what I align my life around is likely what I think life is about. It's where I am putting my chips. It's where I am casting my lots. Where your treasure is, Jesus says, that is where your heart is also.

And that's why I want to take you back to those moments in our life when you experienced the glory and the grandeur. The moments when you found the joy. Because I would be willing to wager that when you go back and recall those moments when you were struck by the marvelous, the magnificent, the beautiful, the overwhelming – it likely was not something you saw on TV ... or read in a newspaper ... or found in a business quarterly report ... or discovered in a retirement account statement. I'm guessing you did not find the joy there. I am betting that when you had your moments in life -- they came when you experienced something grand and glorious – and it was something you knew was connected to something far deeper and far wider. Whether it was the expanse of creation or the birth of a child or the unconditional love of another or the forgiveness of an enemy or the sounds of a perfect symphony or the brilliance of Van Gogh or the smile from an act of your kindness or the movement of the Holy Spirit – whatever it was – you knew deep down that that what you were experiencing was what the world was really about. And if in that moment you had a pound of real nard or a million bucks or the rest of your life to give – why you might have pushed all those chips to the center of the table.

Do you know what I mean?

So I've got this young woman I know in my mind. I've known her since she was a baby. One of the sweetest people I've ever known. And I watch her as she grows up and goes off to college. And she is a track star running for a Big Ten university. Unfortunately, not Michigan. And she is really smart. And she has her whole life in front of her. A bunch of paths she can take. She can kind of do anything in the world she wants. But she gets involved with this ministry near the college she attends and she finds there within the body of students who are worshipping the one named Jesus – she finds there Jesus himself. She has an encounter just like the ones you read about in the Bible. And she realizes that this is what it's all about. This is what life is all about ... this Jesus. She finds the joy. The magnificent joy. She is in the moment. And she reaches into her backpack and she pulls out this jar and inside the jar is her life. Her future. Her career. And she cracks it open and she says, "Here it is. Here's my life." And it is such a sweet fragrance, this offering of hers. And she bathes Jesus with her life. And Jesus says – "I want you to go to one of the most dangerous places in the world – a nation in Africa torn apart by civil war. And I want you to work with victims of the civil war in that country. I want you to love those who have been abused and violated and damaged. Go work in a hospital there and show what the love of Christ looks like. And that's what she

does. Because she knows that this is what life is all about. And it's been years. And she is still there. Aligning her life around what she knows is real.

Now I tell you that story about that young woman – not because I think you should do the same thing. A lot of us wouldn't be much help over there. And not because the only response to the joyful encounter with Christ is to go off somewhere to the mission field far away – like Nigeria or Honduras. I tell you that story to tell you that there is no telling what a person might do if they give themselves the chance to contemplate ... to contemplate ... where the joy really comes from. It comes from the center of the universe. It comes from the Word who was with God. Who is God. Through whom all things were made. To contemplate where our joys come from – is to be evoked. Evoked into a response. To break the jar ... to give the life. It is what it is all about.

So when I think back to when I was ten years old and contemplate the grandeur – I think not only of that moment when one of the great temples of baseball opened before my eyes ... I think even more of the time that same year when I heard the prayer of an old man. My grandfather. My grandfather, as many of you know, was a pastor along with my father. And that year they led worship together on Christmas Eve – many of you have heard me tell this story. And me this ten year old boy sitting in the pew and hearing my grandfather pray the Christmas prayer. And while it is hard to explain, all I can tell you is that I heard something holy and glorious. An old man having a conversation with God – a conversation that sounded like a chat between two good friends. A conversation that made me sense beyond a doubt that God was in the room that night. God was very present. I could feel him. It was one of the most real moments in my life. It was sheer Joy. And if there have been any moments since when I have moved any chips to the center of the table, broken open any jars of perfume, wagered any part of my life on the rabbi from Nazareth – they are traced to that moment. The prayer of an old man. Glory.

How about you? Have you seen the glory?