



**Columbia, Missouri**  
**The Worship of God • February 6, 2022**



**The Scripture**  
**Mark 6:30-34; 53-56**

*The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.*

*When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.*

**The Message**  
**“Small Victories: Companions”**  
**Mark Briley**

Small Victories. Going to Target with one item on your shopping list and leaving Target purchasing exactly that one item... small victory! Opening the car window to shoo a fly out and it works... small victory! Bought new laundry detergent and the scoop was on the top... small victory! Ordered a ten-piece chicken nugget, got eleven... [*and all the*

*people of God said...*] small victory! And doesn't it just feel good! Small victories – we have them every day though we tend to overlook them.



This kid became the face of the small victory in 2007. Cute kid. His name is Sammy Griner, and he was 11 months old in this picture.<sup>1</sup> He was just having fun with his family on the beach, grabbed a handful of sand and was determined to eat it. Before he got a mouth full, his mother snapped this picture and posted it to social media for her family and friends to enjoy with the caption: “*I hate sandcastles.*” Little did she know that the likeness of her son would go global.

Small Victory Memes began popping up all over the place [*Late to work – Boss was even later*].

CNN dubbed him the internet's most famous baby. His image began to pop up in advertisements for Vitamin Water and Virgin Mobile. Sammy's mug was literally put all over mugs. Hot Topic put it on t-shirts, and Radio Shack used it around their corporate office as motivation for its employees (*Did it work? Does Radio Shack still exist?*). Even the White House used Sammy's image to roll out some new reform campaigns in 2013. Who knew? You keep eating that sand, Sammy.



We're diving into a series on *Small Victories* this morning. I was driven this direction, in part, because we're in the midst of the Winter Olympics in Beijing. But... we also know that life's not all gold-medals. I love the Olympics. I love the distinguished and dedicated competition, but I love the back stories all the more. The human spirit is capable of marvelous things, and the stories of overcoming and pure determination are so inspiring... huge, unbelievable, victories of a lifetime!

But when you turn off the television and must go out into the world again, I remember that *I* didn't earn a spot on the Olympic Team. So, I'm wondering, “*What kind of victory am I experiencing in my own life?*” And then I get a phone call from a friend who says, “*Mark, things are hard right now, but God is good, and I'm sober another day.*” And I think, “*Okay... this is victory in the trenches.*” It may not make the news, and you may or may not get a medal for your small victories, but this is where faith is won... one small victory at a time.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Success\\_Kid](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Success_Kid)

Every person you see in this place today... and every single person you pass by in a given day is fighting a battle of some kind... maybe hanging on to life one small victory at a time. We quickly lose sight of this. It seems instead of seeing each other with compassion knowing we're all carrying something and we're all pandemic-ing the best ways we can, we fall to the trap of seeing each other as competitors. It's a scarcity mentality. Is there enough for me? Is there enough money? Is there enough happiness? Is there enough security? Is there enough love? Is there enough toilet paper – that was so early pandemic – now it's COVID tests or any number of other things that we can't produce fast enough now.

If we feel we are lacking in any of these ways, we can see others as the competition for enough. You may say, "*Well – maybe – but I'm not overtly challenging every person I see, competing for the same money or the same health or the same love.*" That's fair. But maybe it's more comparative scarcity; the "*I wish*" mentality. "*I wish I was a little bit taller; I wish I was a baller...*" Right? "*I wish I had their job or their house or their spouse or their personality.*"

This mentality does something to our spirits on the inside. When we are comparatively competing, we dig a hole deeper and deeper in our spirits that we then try to fill with things that will make the scarcity seem less. But the voids in our spirit aren't filled with any of those things. Seeing the same countless people we encounter everyday as companions, however, somehow begins to heal that sense of scarcity. We'll call that small victory this morning, compassion.

Jesus was good at compassion – not like compassion's an Olympic sport or anything – but he was good at it. I'm not sure if that came naturally to him; I mean did Jesus have to learn skills? Was he born knowing exactly how to whittle a coffee table out of a fallen tree? Did he ever have to measure twice, or did he always cut it right the first time? I have questions. Jesus, fully divine indeed, yet fully human, too? I'll figure that out about the time I figure out what happened in the second half of last Sunday's AFC Championship game. *Lord, in your mercy.*

Jesus was good at compassion, but it must have come through some of his own difficult experiences. In our text from Mark's gospel today, Jesus has just come through some tough times. At the beginning of the sixth chapter, Mark writes that Jesus was getting the "*Just a carpenter*" speech from his hometown people. He was teaching them and serving those in need there, but they would scoff and say, "*This is just Mary's kid, right? The carpenter? The carpenter who's three-legged stools always wobble? And now he's acting like he's God? Who does he think he is?*"

Jesus was run out of town by his own neighbors, childhood friends, and teammates. That had to hurt.

Then he sends out the disciples in pairs to share the Good News, and they encounter success and setbacks. The successes worried King Herod, and he decides to take out his frustrations with the Jesus movement on John the Baptist for he knows John and Jesus are tight. So, Herod has John beheaded, and the crew must be mourning – Jesus had to carry that news harder than anyone. Immediately following this new reality, Jesus says to his inner circle, “*Hey guys – let’s go find some beach somewhere, drop a line and clear our heads for a while.*” So, they set off via boat. Word got out and the crowds followed. By the time their boat could see the shoreline, thousands had gathered waiting for Jesus.

Nobody would blame Jesus for being tired, grieving his hometown rejection, and his cousin’s death, and needing some space. Jesus may have had some competitive thoughts in his head about these people who are all over his life trying to take and take and take from him. But, as the text says, Jesus does not. In fact, it says, “*Jesus had compassion for them.*”

In the original language, “compassion” was a feeling from the gut – it was empathy that made your stomach churn. Some say a closer translation was that upon seeing these people in need, Jesus was moved in his bowels, the gut. By the time our hymnody was coming into play, we were singing about “*having a heart*” and that the heart holds our sense of compassionate feeling. “*Near to the heart of God*” sings much better than “*Near to the guts of God.*”

Jesus didn’t see these people as competitors, however, vying for his resources but companions on the Way... and so he was moved to be with them, to cherish the human experience, and to teach them the hope of what could be in the kingdom he was creating. It’s a kingdom that has room for every struggling companion in the crowd. The word, companion, in the Latin means “*with bread*” -- literally referring to “*people you break bread with*” – such a rich image for we people of the Table.

Compassion has similar roots and means “*the people you suffer with.*” Maybe, for today, we can think about our compassionate companions as those who celebrate the small victories with us. Just as these crowds seeking Jesus were hungry for just a little something... a small victory... just a little edge over their hurts, hang ups, and heartaches... may we see each other as teammates in the quest for small victories.

Lord knows we are like those crowds of people, wrestling with the realities of rebirth promised by Christ and the responsibilities that come with claiming to be among the born again. Nicodemus couldn’t figure out the biology of the whole thing, so let’s not

get too down on ourselves for our own struggles of figuring it out day after day. But we do it. We wake up and, if we're intentional, we claim the faith again – “*Lord, I'm in again today.*” And when we all wake up with that same game plan, then we need to hold each other as companions along the way; not competitors.

We're not all that different, you know. Reporter Kevin O'Keefe crunched numbers for two years to write an article about the average person in America.<sup>2</sup> He was determined to find the most average person in America based on the statistics he compiled. Kevin found him. His name is Robert Burns – determined to embody 140 of the average American statistics. Robert is a maintenance worker living in the burbs of Hartford, Connecticut. He is 36-years-old, 5'8" tall, 185 pounds, and has nine friends. He drinks the milk in the bowl after the cereal is finished and recycles stuff occasionally. Robert usually goes to bed before midnight, isn't famous, and doesn't necessarily want to be. He believes in God, goes to church at least once a month, and can name the Three Stooges. Robert prefers smooth peanut butter over chunky, and he's living day to day for the small victories.

Robert was among the thousands in the crowd awaiting Jesus at the shore for whom Jesus had compassion – not literally – but he was there. And he's here today. He's like you and I just hoping someone will notice that he's a real person, has real issues, is hoping for the small victories to amount to something, and wants to know the real God in Christ we seem to be searching for together. What would it take for us to choose each other as companions and not competitors? You know what I've found? Extending compassionate companionship from the gut heals both of us. I'm healed when you offer that to me, and you're healed in the offering of it... and vice versa.

It turns out that welcome is solidarity – or so Anne Lamott says. She says, [You know that] “*we're glad you're here and we're with you stuff? This whole project called you being alive, you finding Well, we're in on that.*”<sup>3</sup> Isn't that great? And Jesus modeled it for us.

The gospel text says, and I'm paraphrasing a little: “*Jesus went all over the place – into the inner city and the suburbs... into Break Times and Chipotles... into Boone Hospital into the Food Pantry. He went to concerts and AA meetings and accepted invitations into birthday barbeques at Cosmo Park as he was jogging through. He listened to people and healed them. He taught, and laughed, and sang Kelly Clarkson's 'Since You've Been Gone' on karaoke nights.*”

Jesus did so much – and there were a ton of intense moments – execution-sort of intense moments. He flipped tables and started revolutions – huge stuff. But in this

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph, Nicole. “Here's Joe American.” *Newsweek*, October 31, 2005, 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Small Victories*. Anne Lamott. Riverhead Books. New York. 2014.

passage, let's live in the small victory of accepting his compassion for the average way-seeker, realizing that in an average moment like 3:47 PM on a Tuesday afternoon, Jesus understands, feels our feels in his gut, and is holding our hope for even the smallest of victories to carry us in the moment. He's moved by the hurt you feel when the work just isn't there. He's moved by the anxiety of a teenager who's questioning her identity. He's wracked by the pain of the one whose life partner has gone heavenward, and the quiet spaces are nothing short of agonizing. But Jesus is also grinning about the small victories we recognize and celebrate; about glimpses of light in the darkness; about car rides with fathers and sons who can find the joy in sharing a song like Simon McDermott shares with his dad, Ted.

Simon said, "*Dad worked in a factory when he got married to mom, but his passion was singing, and he loved doing that on the side when he could. People called him The Song-a-minute Man because of how many songs he knows.*"<sup>4</sup> Ted's struggle of the last few years has been tough on him and the family. Disease has taken much of his memory which has caused great challenge and distress and sadness as things are forgotten... including the recognition of his family. However, his gift for remembering songs mostly remains. Simon has found a great joy in singing with his dad for when they drive and sing, they are alive again together; companions, sharing the suffering, sharing the blessing. Take a look at one of their rides together.<sup>5</sup>

**[Watch this YouTube video of a father and son singing "Cuando"**

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UQ5mjFzHTA> ]**

Doesn't that just evoke joy? It doesn't erase the pain that we know exists but it's a small victory that is full of the grace of God. Can we find those in our own lives? Cherish and celebrate those time-stands-still perspective moments? After 60-million views and more than a quarter of a million dollars raised through these videos to support the Alzheimer's Society that offered compassionate help for his family as they walk this journey with his dad, their small victory is becoming a major victory. He hopes many families will experience growing victories as they fund needed research to defeat this disease. Big victories always start somewhere, right?

Remember little Sammy Griner of Success Kid Meme fame? For years, Sammy's dad, Justin, suffered from kidney failure, spending hours a day on dialysis. Justin became in desperate need of a transplant. His wife decided to launch a *GoFundMe* campaign to help raise the \$75,000 needed to support the medical care and transplant.<sup>6</sup> She hesitated to use her son's "*Success Kid*" meme wishing to focus on her husband's medical need. Friends convinced her to use the image, however, and after doing so

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.clitheroeadvertiser.co.uk/news/local/song-a-minute-man-is-a-national-music-sensation-1-8078273>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUapDaSKzys>

<sup>6</sup> Lots of stories about this online. Here is one: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/15/living/success-kid-dad-needs-help/>



she raised over \$100,000 from over 4,800 donors in just a few days. Justin successfully received a transplant. One day, you're eating sand – and years down the road, that moment creates small victories that then lead to moments like this.



Small victories? When it comes to genuine, Jesus-loving, faith-filled compassion – I'm not sure any victory is all that small. But when we can't see the finished picture and wonder if anything beautiful is ahead of us, let's find strength in the small victories – for today's small victory is tomorrow's healing.

May it be so.

**Song of Focus**  
***"There Is a Place for You Here"***  
**Words and Music: Ed Varnum**

1. You've been looking, you've been searching for so long for a way from the madness, the sadness, and the throng to a place that accepts you, your spirit, and your song, that place where you know that you belong.
2. This is a new day, the sunrise, a new dawn, where the emptiness, the loneliness are gone in the promise that one day God will right all that is wrong. Hear the promise in the place where you belong.

*Refrain:*

And so, welcome dear friend.  
We'll be there for each tear to multiply the joy, divide every fear.  
And all who are distant, we invite to come near.  
In the love of Jesus, there's a place for you here.

3. Christ looked with compassion when he saw the great throng like sheep with no shepherd, like singers with no song.

*(Continues on the next page.)*

And he called the church to welcome God's children to come home  
to the place where they know that they belong.

*Refrain:*

And so, welcome dear friend.

We'll be there for each tear to multiply the joy, divide every fear.

And all who are distant, we invite to come near.

In the love of Jesus, there's a place for you here.

**BROAD HEARTS   BROAD MINDS   BROAD REACH**