

Big Deals Come in Little Packages (But Don't Sweat the Small Stuff)

*Matthew 12:33-36; 13:31-33*

Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV – 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (August 3) 2014

<sup>33</sup> “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. <sup>34</sup> You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. <sup>35</sup> The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. <sup>36</sup> I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak,

<sup>31</sup> He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. <sup>32</sup> It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

<sup>33</sup> He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

We continue today in our summer sermon series on topics. Today is about IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS THAT COUNT.

The little things really do make a difference. I heard Billy Graham say that in a sermon when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and I've been a believer ever since.

It was just a **14 inch hand movement**, that took less than a second, but its meaning was much bigger. It doesn't happen ALL the time, but more frequently that you'd expect. It's the left hand, down at about hip level moving from right to left, from the rider of the Harley Davidson, or some other BIG motorcycle – just a small signal of fraternity, of siblinghood. When a Harley Hog rider gives it to me and I'm riding in the opposite direction on my 105 cc Honda Elite, it makes me feel important. I ALWAYS return the sign.

Little things are important. Listen to **birds singing outside your window in the morning**; pay attention, and you begin the day with a sense of wonder in the midst of God's good creation.

Listen to the **crickets in the evening**. Pay attention, and you get a real sense of the characteristic of PERSISTENCE.

Little things mean a lot.

When I see **two senior citizens**, well into decades of marriage, still **hold hands** with one another, it gives me a sense of wonder and appreciation. Little things mean a lot.

Jesus understood this, when He taught His disciples (and us) the words we heard from Matthew's Gospel today. **You see, little things tell us the essence of what the big thing is all about.**

He talked about Leaven (or we call it today “yeast.”) Last Sunday in early morning worship Wayne Williams showed us two loaves of bread he made, one without the little tiny yeast and one with. The first was flat as a pancake; the second was big and plump.

Let me have a volunteer to show you the same principle. [This 12 ounce glass of water; please break the seal of the lid and take a swallow. OK, taste alright? Now let me add just a dropper of this vinegar and shake it up. How's it taste now? Can you taste a difference?]

The pioneer psychologist Carl Jung sometimes asked his patients where they had been immediately prior to coming to his office. Then he would carefully ask them questions about the details of whatever experience they were having, in the mundane stuff of their life, in those few moments. He said that we humans are mostly consistent folks, and how we act in the details and habits of ordinariness will reveal our entire way of living.

Each person's living in any moment is a hologram of the pattern by which they live their entire life. ... The way in which we go to the grocery store will tell us how we live out our life. The way we tend the life force in a plant in our home may well tell us how we tend to the life force in our own life. [Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, "Embracing Life" (pp. 207-14)]

Jesus said, in the reading today from chapter 12 (and one of the most troubling bits of scripture for most people) that **on the day of judgment, people will give account for every careless word they speak**. Jesus wasn't telling us that God is a nit-picker. Read the verses before that word: **Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit**

What we do with the little things tells us about the big picture, much more than does the ***Photo-shopped-make-up-applied-fashionable-clothing-covered full body***.

Ask any airline safety inspector about what the hidden weapon or explosive means underneath a pretty appearance.

DNA is microscopically small, but it tells us the identity of the whole physical being.

Whenever I hear somebody tell me how many different "do-gooder" organizations they belong to, or how much money they have given to what good causes, I am almost immediately put on guard. Let me SEE how kindly you treat people, and form my own opinion. Don't try to convince me. Just let the goodness show, without having to tell me about it.

Rod Blackstone recently shared with me, from a local restaurateur the same lesson I heard from a waitress on a radio program back in 1994: **Wait Staff have a very good idea of the character of a person by how they treat the person waiting on them. The waitress I heard all those years ago spoke from a career of bad experiences WITH CHRISTIANS. Many of the self-proclaimed Christians, she said, left stingy tips along with some handwritten bit of**

**scripture about the love of Jesus. She said that if the love of Jesus made people that stingy, she'd prefer atheists.**

Parents, please, teach your children the importance of generosity. Teach them by letting them SEE you do it.

Little things make such a difference.

I know (which is why I wrote the subtitle to the sermon) that there are some people sitting there saying, "***But, Pastor, I thought we aren't supposed to sweat the small stuff.***")

And yes, there was a very big selling book by that title, by Richard Carlson. And it has helped some people get past their neurotic obsessions with details in life that tie them up into knots, that prevent them from looking at the big picture. But ***actually***, that book helps people to see how the IMPORTANT small stuff is what makes the big differences – things like:

- Living in the present moment
- Letting others have the glory at times
- Lowering your tolerance to stress
- Trusting your intuitions, and
- Living each day as it might be your last

The big difference is what I have heard called, "***The Tyranny of Choice.***" Put simply, there are too many folks today who give as much attention to what flavor ice cream they will get from amongst 32 choices at Baskin Robbins as they do to what college they will attend.

We aren't to be paralyzed by every detail in our lives – particularly when they are MERELY the expectations of other people.

***But, if we pay attention to the details of what makes us tick***, then the big picture will take care of itself and the unimportant details will no longer be a burden.

One day I was sharing lunch with a fellow, who told me how much he idolized his father. I was spellbound to hear him lay out the life story of the gentleman who had obviously impacted him so much. For each hardship that came along in his father's life, the son said, "***This could have put him down; this could have made him cynical; this could have made him just throw in the towel. But it did not. It was what it was, and he counted on God to carry him through. And that is how his whole life has been lived.***"

I had not realized just what a saint this man's father had been, until I heard the son tell the story. And, I suspect that there are some for whom the same opinion would not be held of this man.

The **lesson I learned from it** was that ***we tend to see what we are looking for***. And if we look for the good little things in a person's life, we can find them.

And when we are able to see the good little things in a person's life, we are able to reflect those things back to them.

The opposite is also true: if we want to nit-pick, we can find fault in just about anybody. What we look for is what we will find.

None of us is perfect; we are all a hodge-podge. That is our consistency.

If the leaven of our life is judgmentalism, then we will find faults and (whether or not we are verbose in our fault finding) this is how we will be known by others. Our leaven will be like the vinegar in the water.

If, however, we look for and thus find the goodness of people's lives, then our leaven will be that of encouragement. We will NOT be able to keep this quiet, however. And our leaven will be as powerful as the Harley biker's 14 inch salute to the PeeWee Herman Scooter driver.

**It is actually (and pardon me for tying sermons together) not much different from last week's lesson: If we don't know God's forgiveness, we have a hard time being forgiving people. But when we do know God's forgiveness, it's impossible for us to be unforgiving.**

The bottom line is that we simply cannot FAKE IT. You can only put so much lipstick on a pig, as the saying goes. (Geez, I hope that's not sexist. I think it sounds like it. OK, you can only put so much Axe spray on a skunk.)

My sisters and brothers, Jesus gave you an identity in your baptism: Beloved Child of God, precious and beautiful to behold. When you GET that – in your heart and not just your head, it becomes the leaven of your life.

THAT is the little thing that works from the inside out.

- You are very, very valuable in God's eyes.
  - You don't need to put anybody down in order to feel or look good.
- Pay attention to the little things that are important in your life – beginning with God's unqualified love that forgives all our sins.
- Then pay attention to the little blessings God puts all around you to remind you how much God wants you to be blessed in every moment –
  - from the early morning birdsong through the persistent cricket chirps at the shank of the day.

Little things. Big deals. Give thanks.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.