

“Sweat the Big Stuff”

A sermon based on Haggai 1 and Luke 20:27-38
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
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You’ve all heard the expression, “Don’t sweat the small stuff.” It’s an aphorism intended to help us to remember to focus on the things that really matter. We have such an aphorism because we so often get lost in the small stuff.

Sometimes I feel like there’s a mysterious force, rooted right in our DNA, that drives us to focus on the small stuff. I can remember the time just after we bought our Corolla. We had had it less than a month, and it was the first time we had bought a brand new car.

Nathan was only 6 at the time. Since the nature of 6 year old boys usually is obvious, you would think that a fully-grown, experienced adult would be able to keep his expectations of such a boy realistic. Without fail, young children are going to spill stuff. If the food is crumbly, there’s going to be crumbs scattered. It’s always going to happen.

Well, because I was so fixated on keeping our brand new car nice, a small thing, really, an expectation that was doomed to fail, I ended up setting myself up for failure. Returning from a trip to Duluth, the kids had snacked in the back seat, and food matter was spilled on the seat. I was tired after a long day, and when I saw the mess, I lost it. I yelled at Nathan, and shamed and embarrassed myself.

We kept that Corolla a long time, crumbs and dog hair, too. But the kids have grown and matured so well, and I hope that I have grown and matured some, too.

That’s how it is with us, getting lost in the small stuff, and losing sight of the big stuff, the things that really matter. The scripture passage from Luke presents a classic example. By this time in his Gospel, the religious leaders have been out to entrap and silence Jesus for a while. And time after time, they have failed.

In this passage, they try one more time to, if not silence Jesus, then at least discredit him before the people. They came to hate Jesus because he would not keep the rules. He healed people on the Sabbath. He would let unclean people, like prostitutes, touch him. He would eat and otherwise associate with the absolute lowlifes

of society: tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers and sinners. And he would tell them that God loved them, and that God's grace was meant for them, too.

To the Pharisees and Sadducees it was all maddening. They were so focused on the small stuff, like how well someone washed before eating, or whether the Sabbath rules were being followed, that they completely lost sight of the big stuff, like God's love, and what the Sabbath is really for. All they knew was that Jesus had to be stopped.

As their previous attempts to entrap Jesus kept failing, they grew more and more desperate. This crazy story they cooked up reveals their desperation. The star of their improbable tale is a poor woman, who married a man with six brothers.

Sadly, the first man dies. According to Jewish custom at that time, one of the brothers was supposed to marry her. The intention behind such a custom was two-fold. First, the woman would be cared for, and second, the hope was that the family's line would continue through the children.

Anyway, the brother dies, too. So a second brother steps in. He dies, and so on through the last brother. Finally, the Sadducees say, the woman herself dies. I bet she did!

Can you imagine? Who could have concocted such an absurd story except a bunch of small-minded men? Of course, we can well imagine Jesus wanting to burst out laughing.

Well, the story is told, and then comes the question. "In heaven, whose wife will the woman be?" Jesus answers their question easily. "Those who live in this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage." Even though they were so focused on the small stuff, the Sadducees could not help but see the wisdom in this.

But Jesus was not finished with them yet. He goes on to cut through their façade of curiosity. Luke foreshadows this in verse 27, where he tells us that the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection. Jesus taught them from scripture that they were wrong for disbelieving the resurrection. He said, "the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the [burning] bush, where he speaks of the Lord as

the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all of them are alive.”

By making that point, Jesus reminded everyone in the crowd that the Sadducees didn't even believe in the resurrection. So it left everyone to wonder what they were doing in posing a question to Jesus about the resurrection, as if it even mattered to them. Jesus exposed their hypocrisy, and the exposure was so embarrassing, Luke writes, “they no longer dared to ask him another question.”

They should have known better, those Sadducees. They were all very educated men. They were experienced leaders. But's that's what can happen when you sweat the small stuff, and lose sight of the things that really matter most.

II

In one of Mumford and Sons songs, “Roll Away Your Stone,” there's this pair of lines: “And I have filled this void with things unreal And all the while my character it steals.” It's a play on St. Augustine's idea that there is a void, a hole, in every one of us, a space that only God can fill. Our trouble comes when we try to fill that void with other things.

The first passage we heard this morning from Haggai gives us a glimpse of when this was true for the Hebrews. Haggai spoke in the time after the Exile in Babylon. The Jews have returned to Palestine and they are rebuilding. As anyone would expect, they work to rebuild their homes, their farms, the shops, and their businesses first. That would become the basis for rebuilding their economy.

Haggai reminded them that they had one more project to complete: the rebuilding of the Temple. It could have been the case that the people were just overwhelmed by the scope of the project. Some of them certainly were old enough to remember the splendor that was Solomon's Temple. The prospect of recapturing that splendor seemed too daunting. And so, nothing was happening. The Temple mount remained an idle construction site.

God, through the prophet, wanted them to understand that, though their homes and farms and businesses were rebuilt, though their economy was well on the way to being re-established, there was a void in their lives, a void that no home or farm or work could fill. They needed to tend to the spiritual center of their lives.

One place that embodies for me a people's commitment to the spiritual core of their community life is St. Josaphat's Basilica. St. Josaphat's is one of the most magnificent places of worship in Milwaukee. And it was built by an immigrant community.

Driving by on I-94, the basilica stands tall above the neighborhood. When you get off the freeway and drive the streets around the church, you'll see modest, simple houses that date back to the 1880s and 1890s. Those immigrants gave of their time and their talent and what little financial assets they had to build a place that speaks of what mattered to them. They also took advantage of a great opportunity that presented itself.

In 1896, the city of Chicago decided to move its main post office from the imposing, Second Empire style building where it had been since the fire of 1871, to a new place. Fr. Wilhelm Grutz learned that the city wanted to sell off the building, and so he swooped in to make the purchase, with the funds that the parish had been collecting, penny by nickel by dime. The stones from the old Chicago post office, including the six massive pillars that would grace the main entrance, arrived in Milwaukee on 500 flatbed rail cars.

The faithful of the parish were just not content to worship in a place that doubled as a basketball gymnasium. They knew the importance of having a beautiful place to tell the story of their faith, as Christians and as Polish Catholics. And it remains a glorious place of worship to this day.

Haggai wanted to inspire that same kind of spiritual desire in his people. "Yes, it may seem daunting, but take courage, for God is with you, and will see you through." He reminds them that the Temple matters not just to them, but it will stand as a symbol to all the world. That's big stuff.

Remembering that they are intended by God to be a light to the nations, that's big stuff. Having a sacred place, set apart, that will remind them of who they are, who God is, and how much their relationship with God means, that's big stuff.

Tend to that big stuff, get to work and rebuild the Temple, and all of the other stuff will fall into place, and that void within each of you will be filled with what is real, good and holy.

We all are too aware of how our society seems always stressed out. We medicate ourselves for anxiety and depression. Our tempers so often are so short, and we lose patience so easily. Our culture holds up so much small stuff and says to us, “If you only had this, then you would finally be happy. Then others would finally look at you and feel envy.”

We’re about to enter headlong into another binge of advertising intended to remind us all over again of all the things we don’t have, that we need, and that we can show how much we love our loved ones, if we would just buy them all the wonderful small things on sale now. Is it any wonder we so often feel inadequate, so deficient, so out of touch with the digital mainstream? It’s all small stuff. None of it will last.

Hear the words of Luke and Haggai. Focus on the big things. Remember that there is a space within you that only God can fill, and to try to put anything else there is try to fill the void “with things unreal.”

Remember that this church is like the Temple in Jerusalem, and like St. Josaphat’s in Milwaukee. This church tells a story about what matters most to us. It’s a place our forebears set apart to help tell the story of their faith, a place that we have inherited from them. This is home base for us and for our mission.

And today, we welcome another one into the Household of Jesus. That’s big stuff, too. May God help us this day and always to focus on what matters most. Amen.