

God of The Living

A Remembrance Day sermon by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented November 6th, 2016,
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Luke 20: 27-38

We raised two boys: and an important discussion was taking place in the manse with our boys a number of years ago. It wasn't so much a deep theological discussion about atonement through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. It wasn't about the level of poverty in the inner-city or the poor high school graduation rates of at-risk youth. It was about hair! That's right! HAIR! The stuff I used to have growing out of the top of my head. It was an animated discussion. Since I believed good first impressions are made with appearance--I thought it was even more important that my sons, in spite of their charming personalities, should be well groomed: hair cut short and neat. My wife said she wanted no part of the discussion. It all ultimately came down to one of two simple options: get a haircut or die. I had raised my blood pressure unnecessarily and successfully made the family miserable. I made small stuff big stuff!

In our Scripture lesson from Luke it would seem that making small stuff into big stuff is part of the human DNA, at least in religious circles and probably throughout all community relationships. The Sadducees, one of the powerful parties in the Jewish religious hierarchy, in an attempt to trap Jesus by his saying some heretic statement, asked him a question about marriage and resurrection. One of seven brothers married a woman and had no children, and then he died. As was often the custom, to care for the widow another brother married her, and the same thing happened to him--no children and then death. All seven brothers married the widow and all met with the same fate--you guessed it--no children and death. The seven-time widow eventually herself died. Now came the perplexing question. "In heaven whose wife of the seven is she?" Jesus reflects for a moment before answering. If I were Jesus, I would have begun my answer by saying, "You would have thought by the time the fourth brother had died that the rest of them would have thought twice about marrying her." But instead he reminds them that God is God of the living, not the dead. The question they had asked was inconsequential. He is basically saying, "Our concern should be about the living."

As we all know, we live in a society that is more stressed out, on more anxiety reducing medications, and has more therapists and mental health counselors than any other time before. Depression, rage, anger, physical violence--we all know that these are by-products of a society that makes everything big stuff....a society that proclaims you must have it all or you are deficient. The search for the stuff that the world considers big stuff makes us feel more insufficient and drives us to seek more and more of this world's unattainable dream. To be happy you need this trinket or that title or this victory? Oblate priest and writer Father Ronald Rolheiser on reflecting on the emptiness that many feel as they search for the supposed big stuff writes: "Always there are deeper hungers that are being stifled. We are driven by our insufficiency to seek things that are unnecessary.

A bride and her mother came to me with a Martha Stewart wedding book, of all things, in hand. They were here to plan the wedding. They were expressing their concern whether the floral arrangements that they were considering would coordinate with the simple plainness of our neighbourhood church. They further inquired about the length of the wedding service. This was crucial so they could coordinate the opening of the bar and the serving of the hors d'oeuvres exactly at the moment the first guest arrived at the reception. They even expressed concern about whether the bridesmaids' dresses would clash with the blue carpet, not loving God or loving neighbour. Their anxiety was off the chart--all over inconsequential, unimportant minutia.

Contrast all that with this scene from a marriage of over 50 years. I arrived at the home of Dave and Mary on a dark, chilly fall evening. The image through the front window offered an idealic scene. The silhouette of an attentive and loving wife sitting next to the bed of her very sick husband, witnessing to their marriage vows--in sickness and in health. That's big stuff! But the reality was that David had

just died. While I knew much of his family history, he needed to repeat it again just one more time before he left us. At an earlier visit David said: "Phil, for so many years of my marriage to Mary, I was obsessed with my work and my golfing and trying to prove to myself that I was important. You know the years of my excessive drinking. I was fortunate that Mary and the children hung in there with me. I am glad I figured it out--what was really important--or I might have been dying alone at this time."

David had learned what was really important stuff--the big stuff. Loving God through loving his wife and his family, David had comprehended not only that Jesus is right on here. And maybe the words of Richard Carlson from his book *"Don't Sweat the Small Stuff -- And It's All Small Stuff"* are "right on" as well. Carlson wrote this: *"Something wonderful begins to happen with the simple revelation that life, like an automobile, is driven from the inside out, not the other way around. As you focus more on becoming more peaceful with where you are, rather than focusing on where you would rather be, you begin to find peace right now, in the present."*

To love God and to love neighbor--so simple, yet we make it so difficult. And the truth is to find the fulfillment that comes with fulfilling these two commandments comes not with addition or multiplication but by subtraction.

Who is married to whom in heaven: small stuff! What car to drive: more small stuff. Driving a nail into wood and building a home for the poor: BIG STUFF. What floral arrangement for a wedding table: small stuff. Serving at a table in a soup kitchen or helping a third-world family plant a garden to feed themselves: BIG STUFF. I wonder whether Jesus would consider the hair length of our sons big stuff? I think I know the answer! And so do you!

Let us pray. Ever giving and ever generous God, pour your Holy Spirit upon us so that we might be wise in our discernment of what is small stuff and big stuff. We pray that we will keep our passion for loving you and our neighbor far above our love for possessions. Holy Spirit, come and take possession of our hearts! Amen.