

Pentecost25_YrC_Prop27_111013_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of the God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

When I was a teenager at St. David's in Nashville, I remember that our acolytes (I wasn't allowed to be one - I was a girl) were drilled by the acolyte master to march, not so much in lockstep, but with their right elbows out perpendicular to their bodies, almost touching the shoulder of the person next to them. The crucifer also had to wear white gloves when he carried the cross in and out.

We were a pretty low-key, laid-back congregation, so all that almost-military pomp and circumstance seemed pretty out of place to me. And the acolyte master was pretty tough on them. He didn't tolerate mistakes very well. He didn't smile very much. (I know, because I had him for 8th grade Sunday School class!) And his own kids always seemed a little scared of him, too.

So, many, many years later, when I began to train acolytes in churches where I worked, I tried to soften things up a little bit. Of course, I wanted everyone to behave - to look good - so my rules were (and still are) things like no chewing gum, no twirling your rope belt, pay attention, look like you are interested even if you aren't, etc. Those are things I think anyone participating in the service should do all the time.

But mistakes? Well, if they are mistakes because someone is not paying attention, that's one thing. But when something happens beyond your control, it's not a big deal. For instance, candles are often hard to light, especially if the wick has disappeared into the wax, and no matter how hard you try, you just can't get it lit! Sometimes the torch handles tend to get stuck when you put them in the stands that hold them up; the next time you go to get a torch, it won't come out of the stand until at least 2 acolytes pull on it together to get it loose.

None of that really matters, except that sometimes people complain about candles not being lit or similar events, and the acolyte is embarrassed. Well, someone once told me that when Mr. Wakefield was the rector here, if someone complained about an unlit candle, he would say, "Why, didn't you know that this is the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, and on the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, we don't like that particular candle?" He made what seemed like big stuff become small stuff.

I have enjoyed that line, and I use it all the time when training acolytes now. I tell them that if something happens that is out of their control and someone makes a remark about it, just tell that person, politely of course, that this is the Sunday we do it this way! It relaxes them every time. What might seem like big stuff really is small stuff.

In today's Gospel lesson, some people want to turn small stuff into big stuff. The story is set in Jerusalem, just a few days before the Passover. It is just a few days before Jesus' arrest and trial. His time is drawing to an end, and the time with him is very short and precious.

By this time, everyone in Judah knows who Jesus is: a miracle worker, a famous healer, a wise man, the one who raised a girl from the dead, who threw out the money changers from the Temple, who came into Jerusalem with people shouting and waving. Some people say he is the next Moses, some say Elijah, some say the Messiah.

Well, some Sadducees - learned men from the branch of Judaism that doesn't believe in a resurrection from the dead - come to see him. They haven't encountered Jesus yet, and this is their big moment. And this is what they say: Teacher, if a man who is one of 7 brothers marries a woman who produces no children and he dies, and then his brother marries the same woman, who remains childless, and he dies, then each of the other brothers marries her and she is still childless, to whom is she married in the resurrection?

Now, as you might guess, this is a pretty far-fetched question, but it is an example of one of the 600 laws in Torah, and it is about levirate marriage. Levirate marriage was when a childless widow was married to the nearest kin of her late husband, and it was designed to do two things. First, it was designed to carry on the family name. Any child produced by the levirate system would be the heir of the first husband, and, therefore, the family received God's blessing.

The second purpose was to provide security for the woman. As you know, women in that day were property; without the presence of a child or the protection of the first husband, the woman was very vulnerable in society. But by marrying the next brother, she became his property and was protected. Because the woman in this

story was married 7 times and was still childless, she has failed to fulfill her purpose in life. She dies essentially as a woman under a curse.

So, the Saducees ask the question. And Jesus reflects for a little bit before he gives an answer. And he reminds them that God is the God of the living, not the dead. The question they have asked is small stuff, especially since they didn't even believe in the resurrection. And Jesus says, "Our concern should be about the living."

If the Saducees' question is small stuff, what is the big stuff? It's to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself! Jesus tells everyone that that is the only big stuff in life! Jesus' basic message is that those who were administrators of The Law (as in 'hang all The Law and The Prophets') had spent too much time on the minutiae of The Law - turning two basic commandments into over 600 commandments. Who cares who will be married to whom in heaven? That's small stuff. It's all about loving God and loving neighbor!

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.

A bride and her mother came to a pastor with a Martha Stewart book in hand. They were there to plan the wedding. They were expressing their concern whether the floral arrangements that they were considering would coordinate with the simplicity of the small frame 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 were worried about whether the bridesmaids' dresses would clash with the red carpet. They were clearly not loving God or loving neighbor. Their anxiety was off the chart--all due to inconsequential details.

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 following these two commandments comes not with addition or multiplication but by subtraction. Christian simplicity

frees us from this modern anxiety. People become once again more important than possessions.

Who is married to whom in heaven? Small stuff! What car should I drive? Small stuff! Which neighborhood should I live in? Small stuff! Painting the newly built walls of a home for a poor family? **BIG STUFF!** Serving meals at a soup kitchen or planting a community garden? **BIG STUFF!**

I wonder whether Jesus thinks not lighting all the candles on the 25th Sunday after Pentecost is small stuff or **BIG STUFF?** I think I know the answer!