

*“Sweat the Small Stuff”*

*II Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19*

*Bible Sunday, November 17, 2013*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

*The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

“LOL:” most folks know stands for “laugh out loud,” usually used in electronic communication to emphasize humor. Something is “LOL funny” or, just to be sure you know something is light-hearted, you follow it with “LOL.”

So this morning God is LOL funny, with apologies to any for whom this sounds irreverent. It’s hard to read this text from Thessalonians without thinking God has a sense of humor. As most know, this text is part of the lectionary, the appointed cycle of readings followed by most of the Christian Church in most places at most times; and the great thing about the lectionary is its timeliness. Here it is, right on time: ten days away from Thanksgiving with all of the “vroom!” that comes as prep for “the holidays” starts ramping up; with people working longer hours or multiple jobs or both, just to catch up. In the midst of that we hear:

*“For we heard that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.” (II Thessalonians 3:11)*

Most of us, hearing this word of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, go “LOL.” Or even, “Idle? Yeah, right.” To put Paul’s words in context, we need to remember that the church in Thessalonika, like many of the early Christian communities, was a cooperative enterprise more like a commune or monastery than the church of today. In that setting of intimate community everyone needed to pull their weight. Those who shirked their responsibility made it harder for others and threatened the survival of the community. It happened often enough, apparently, human nature being what it is, that Paul finds it necessary to admonish *“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.”* (vs. 10)

For most of us, “idleness” is a sin we would love to have the luxury to indulge. We’re busy beyond belief. Our lives are full with sales and production meetings, parent/teacher conferences, athletic or artistic performances, serving Christ through the Church....well, make your own list. Perhaps some of you are doing that now. I didn’t mean *now*, literally. Later, ok?

I think the challenge for most of us is not idleness but the distraction of doing less important things and the difficult decisions to determine what is important at what time.

J.J., a Weight Watcher friend of mine moved to Florida and became incredibly busy in her new life there. Reflecting on my theme for today she wrote:

*Regarding your sermon topic re: idleness—it’s not that anyone is idle per se (remember my borrowed saying “Life is already full; you have to give up something you have to get something you want.”) But perhaps there are certain aspects of our lives (spiritual, relationships, health/fitness, educational, etc.) that we have set on “idle” and we FEEL busy because we are spinning our wheels on the other things—especially during the holidays.*

What makes J.J.’s observation hard to implement is that small things do matter! You’ve likely seen the slogan “*Don’t sweat the small stuff*” followed by the exhortation “*It’s all small stuff.*” This contemporary wisdom is intended to keep us from majoring in minors and being swamped by details, a “Don’t worry, be happy” world-view. (BTW, when another friend heard the sermon title “Sweat the Small Stuff she quipped “*Don’t sweat the petty things and don’t pet the sweaty things.*” But I digress.)

Like most wisdom, the saying “*Don’t sweat the small stuff*” is designed to help us achieve balance in life, private and public.

Like most slogans, it is partly true.

On the list of sins, “idleness” appears to be “small stuff.”

Yet the opposite is also true and worthy of our attention if we are to achieve the balance (translate : “peace”) that many people say they desire in life. Simply put: “Sweat the small stuff so it doesn’t become big stuff.” My grandmother reminded her grandchildren: *“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.”* In the Eastern wisdom of the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu observed:

*Big problems arise from small problems  
The wise man (sic) takes care of all his small problems.  
Thus he has no problems*

Easier said than done? Sure. Most things are. But small things do have dramatic results. James Q. Wilson of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard coined the “Broken Window” theory of crime prevention. The theory holds that little things matter. Broken windows left un-repaired lead to more problems: property destruction and ultimately crime and chaos.

Applied to New York City, where I lived a little over a quarter-century ago, the “Broken Window” theory resulted in a startling reduction in crime. Subway fare beaters and squeegee panhandlers arrested for these petty crimes were often found to be wanted felons. While other factors certainly contributed to crime reduction, there is no question that police attention to these small matters, previously considered too unimportant to address, played a considerable part in reducing crime and changing the reputation of New York City. I watched it happen.

We can take a lesson here from mechanics who work for major transportation systems. Aircraft, trains and trucks all have protocols for their mechanics, engineers or drivers to clean certain parts after a set period. This might seem trivial or beneath the status or training of these professionals. Guess what? Cleaning is one of the best ways to find cracked, corroded or broken parts that could contribute to accidents or even catastrophic failure.

Some of my recent personal and pastoral communications reflect the importance of little things. Speaking and acting in ways that respect the other person. Choosing to participate, or refrain from participating, in activities when it is easier to “go along with the crowd.” One of our church leaders, in sobriety for many years, tells that when he sought sobriety the thought of being without alcohol forever was overwhelming. But when he was told, and applied it to himself, that he only had to not have a drink today, he said to himself, “*I can do that. I can go without anything for a day.*” That day stretched to a life of sobriety and a new life of joy.

So let me use one final analogy. I’m going to ask some questions. The questions are not rhetorical but I don’t want a show of hands, either. Think about the answers for yourself:

*If you spent 78 hours a year praying, exercising, reading, journaling, or doing extra schoolwork, would it make a positive difference in your life?*

*If “yes,” how many, hearing that number, thought, “I am so busy now. I’d like to, but I can’t possibly think of spending 78 hours doing those things. That is nearly ten, 8-hour work days a year?”*

*Could you instead commit to 30 minutes, three days a week? Or 15 minutes, each day but Sunday, on prayer, exercise, reading, journaling, schoolwork?*

You see, the numbers are the same: 30 minutes, three days a week or 15 minutes every day but Sunday. Committing that small amount of time each week equals 78 hours a year. Imagine the positive results if re-invested this way!

So what are the broken windows in your life? What are the pieces needing cleaning? Where could a small reallocation of time achieve big results? Not sure? Ask a friend, sibling, parent, partner or pastor. They often see the cracked panes better than we. Fixing the small problems in order to keep out the big problems is a spiritual discipline that leads us to Paul’s big goal at the end of the reading: “*Do not be weary in doing what is right.*” (*II Thess. 3:13*). God wants us to be solid and strong, not shattered. And who couldn’t use a little more energy for that?