



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

25th Sunday after Pentecost (11/11/2018)

Sermon Title: "The Power of Small Things"

Gospel Text: Mark 12:38-44

Within the Church, today is the 25th Sunday after Pentecost. But for the rest of the world, today is the 100th anniversary of the end of World War One. One hundred years ago today, on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, representatives of France, Great Britain, and Germany gathered in a railway car in a forest in northern France to sign the armistice that would silence the guns and end the war.

Here in the United States we don't spend much time in our history classes talking about World War I. It gets overshadowed by World War II, which followed when the world realized that the "War to End All Wars" had failed to do just that. Several years ago, when I had the opportunity to travel to Europe, I remember my surprise at the many World War One monuments and memorials I saw there. They bore witness to the traumatic impact that World War One had on all of European society.

You see, after World War One, never more could war be romanticized or glorified. Just consider the statistics. Even in our own very broken day and age, when mass shootings seem to happen nearly every week, the carnage of World War One still shocks us. Over 9.7 million military personnel and over 10 million civilians died. Another 21 million military personnel were wounded.¹ And even today, the historians can't agree upon why it happened and whose fault it all was.

But I think all reputable historians agree that the primary results of World War One were heartache and tragedy. As the great British writer and historian John Keegan has stated: "The chronical of [World War One's] battles provides the dreariest literature in military history. The war's political outcome scarcely bears contemplation: Europe ruined as a centre of world civilization, [and] Christian kingdoms transformed into godless tyrannies... All that was worst in the [20th] century, the starvation or exile of class enemies, the extermination of racial outcasts, the persecution of incorrect thinkers and artists, the extinction of small [nations]...and the elevation of...warlords to power over voiceless millions, had its origins in the chaos [the war] left behind." In light of all this, Keegan notes with no surprise that "the post-war world spoke of a 'lost generation'...united by shared grief...a sense of guilt...rage and desire for revenge."²

And yet I think most of us still believe that significant change can only come through *big* initiatives, *large* programs, and *massive* undertakings. The inherent *trust* we place in "big things" and our despair in the ability of small things to make a meaningful difference becomes clear when we assess our reaction to today's Gospel. Jesus seems painfully naïve, out of touch, and unrealistic when he dismisses the grand acts of the learned scribes and wealthy donors. Instead,

he heaps his praise on a poor widow who contributed two small coins – a mere penny. Is it really possible, as Jesus seems to say, that small things can make a holy difference?

For me, the answer is unquestionably YES. Small things CAN make a holy difference. Consider a few examples from that big event we've been discussing – World War One. Helen Boylston was an American nurse who served at a British Army base hospital near the Western Front during World War One. In her diary she wrote, "My back is busted in two tonight. Slowly, [moving] down the ward, doing the dressings and making the beds." Such a simple, small thing. And yet, as one historian recently observed, "frequent changing of dressings and application of antiseptic, though physically exhausting, served a critical medical function in the pre-antibiotic era: It became the most effective method for healing infected war wounds and prevented many limb amputations."³ Yes, small things matter.

How about Edith Cavell? She was an English nurse who served on the front lines in Belgium. She never turned anyone away who needed care, regardless of army or nationality. When her region came under German control, Edith "became part of an underground network that helped shuttle Allied soldiers out of German-occupied territory... She...helped more than 200 soldiers escape...before her actions were discovered by the Germans."⁴ What a big difference this one small nurse made.

Here's one more story of the power of a *small* thing in the midst of the so-called "Great War." It involves a young English soldier named Clive. He was a confirmed atheist as World War One opened, and the horrors of battle only confirmed his grim assessment of the universe. In April of 1918, he was wounded by shrapnel, which resulted in his transfer back to Britain to recover from his injuries. On the train ride to London, God did a *small thing* by opening Clive's eyes to the beauty of the English countryside. In a letter to a friend, Clive wrote, "I think I never enjoyed anything so much as that scenery — all the white in the hedges, and the fields so full of buttercups that...they seemed to be of solid gold." God was stirring something in him. Clive began to think that maybe there was a God after all. His faith in Jesus was kindled. As that faith burned brighter, his heart was transformed. Clive is better known to us today as C.S. Lewis, and through novels like *The Chronicles of Narnia* and books like *Mere Christianity*, he became one of the most important and influential Christian voices of the 20th century.⁵ Yes, small things can make a holy difference.

Friends, one of the greatest privileges I have as your pastor is seeing how God is stirring in your life and inspiring you to do so many small and holy things. They make a huge and meaningful difference in the lives of others. In the ride you offer someone to the doctor's office or to visit a friend, you are making a holy difference. In the greeting card you send to a homebound member, you are making a holy difference. In the prayers you offer up in the quiet of your home, you are making a holy difference. As you engagingly and respectfully listen as one of our youth shares both her doubts and dreams with you, you are making a holy difference. In the kind smile and welcome you offer a stranger, you are making a holy difference. In the invitation you extend to someone to come to church, you are making a holy difference. And with even the humblest of financial offerings, you are making a holy difference in our ministries here at Grace. So don't be discouraged or demoralized into thinking the world's problems are too big for you to have an impact. Regardless how old you are, or however limited you think

your gifts and abilities are, through small and simple acts of grace and kindness you *can* make a difference. After all, if our Lord can erupt into our lives through humble things like water, wheat, wine, and mere words, just imagine how Jesus *can* and *will* work through you.

In the wake of the Pittsburgh synagogue shootings, I've been so touched by the response of our Jewish friends. They haven't called for massive social changes to combat the evil of anti-Semitism. After thousands of years of persecution, I think they well know the limited effectiveness of big initiatives. Instead, they've asked everyone – Jew, Christian, Muslim, agnostic – to perform what they call a “mitzvah”: a small, simple act of kindness for another person. Through those small and simple acts of light, they believe they can make a decisive difference in this world.

I think they're right. That's one of the reasons Christ has drawn all of us *here*. In response to the love he has poured out on us, he calls and challenges us to love him back by loving our neighbors through small and simple acts of kindness. So don't be *discouraged*. Don't be *demoralized*. Don't be *afraid*. Like the widow in today's Gospel, bring what you have, regardless how meager it may seem. God *will* make use of it to change the world, one small and simple act of love at a time. Amen.

Cited resources:

¹ <http://www.centre-robert-schuman.org/>

² John Keegan, *An Illustrated History of the First World War* (2001), pp. 404-405, 407.

³ <https://www.pbs.org/w> <https://www.urbanghostsmedia.com/2014/11/10-stories-chivalry-compassion-battlefields-world-war-one/> [gbh/americanexperience/features/the-great-war-american-nurses-world-war-1/](https://www.urbanghostsmedia.com/2014/11/10-stories-chivalry-compassion-battlefields-world-war-one/)

⁴ <https://www.urbanghostsmedia.com/2014/11/10-stories-chivalry-compassion-battlefields-world-war-one/>

⁵ <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/04/cs-lewis-wwi-experiences-atheist-path-to-christianity/>