
Let Go of the Little Things

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A Sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton
Ash Wednesday
12:15 p.m.
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

When I was a newly married twenty-four year old, I came to the quick realization that my family's way of doing things was not the way my husband's family did things. Marion, my mother-in-law, could not have been more different from my Mom. Initially, I struggled to find my footing in our relationship.

My family always ate big holiday meals in the mid afternoon. So, while Ron and I were first dating, I invited everyone over for Easter. Then, I suggested we could eat at 2 p.m. This suggestion was met with utter horror since the Knowltons would not dream of eating before 8 p.m.

When I casually mentioned that our family always opened presents on Christmas Eve, this was met with a look of complete bewilderment. This was only compounded when I made the startling confession that in our house, Santa Claus did not wrap his gifts, but left them naked in the living room in the early morning hours.

Being eager and twenty four, I set about trying to discern the Knowltonian play-book. I imagined I could discern the rules, implement them with perfection, please my mother-in-law, and thus gain her approval. My own mother is a creature of habit and so I had found this a successful approach in the past. The only difficulty was, I experienced my mother-in-law as completely unpredictable. So, rather than learning the rules, I was in a constant state of anxiety trying to predict which way the wind was going to blow.

This came to a head right before the wedding. For our wedding present, my in-laws graciously offered to buy us a set of bedroom furniture. Marion told us to go and find whatever we wanted and then she would meet us at the store to arrange the transaction. Ron and I fell in love with a beautiful Shaker style sleigh bed. It had clean lines, and a beautiful cherry finish. We arranged the meeting time, and I looked forward to showing her what we had found.

Simple right? No way.

She thought the shaker style looked like children's furniture. The wooden knobs were too plain and could not possibly be associated with married adults. She kept showing us other options--giant oriental style, large painted sets with elaborate canopies and would say, "Wouldn't you rather have this set?" "I just don't understand why you would prefer children's furniture." To my great embarrassment she even hauled an unsuspecting salesperson over and demanded that he inform us that we were in the children's department. I was aghast. Ron thought it was hilarious.

He simply told her he didn't agree and that we wanted the sleigh bed.

I, on the other hand spent the next several weeks wracked with guilt over having them buy something that she didn't

approve of. On top of it all I then violated another cardinal rule. I did not realize that it was sinful to pay for furniture delivery. In my new world, I should have known that you always drive a truck to North Carolina where you could get a better deal and bring it back yourself. My direct order from Haverty's was met with great confusion.

I really didn't know what to make of it all. I kept going back to Ron to make sure it was o.k. I even looked at other styles of furniture to see if I could find a compromise we would both like.

Similar scenarios unfolded over the next seven years. I, anxiously trying to predict ahead of time, how I should act in all situations, and constantly getting it wrong. Thus, I was rarely able to relax in my mother-in-law's presence. I was so anxious and distracted I almost set our house on fire on Ron's birthday one year because I didn't realize there was an old pizza box sitting in the oven before I turned it on to preheat.

I fell into the trap of believing my very status in the family depended on my ability to get it right. I completely missed the fact that I had already been accepted and that agreement and unified behavior had never been expected.

But more importantly, all of my anxiety about differences between myself and Marion impeded our ability to fully develop our relationship. It also caused me to miss the most important gift my mother-in-law had given me. When she died very suddenly seven years into our marriage, it was at that very moment I thought, "I am so grateful for her. She gave birth to my husband."

"Remember you are dust, and that to dust you shall return."

We are invited in Lent to a season of self-examination and an appreciation of our mortal nature. In a few minutes the Dean will ask that the ashes to be smudged on our foreheads be a sign of our mortality and a reminder that it is only by God's gracious gift that we transcend these mortal bodies.

It is not a subject that we usually go to willingly. I suspect if you were at the Pancake Supper last night, no one approached you and said, "So, how are you thinking about your death this Lent?"

When we contemplate our Lenten practices, be they relinquishing things or embracing new habits, they are not meant to take place in a vacuum. They are not meant to be a handy opportunity to go back and reclaim failed New Year's resolutions. They are meant to remind us of the preciousness of our life and the lives of those we are graced to love.

Most of us, if we knew today was our last day on earth, would probably carry out a different set of priorities than the task list that occurred to us this morning as we were getting dressed.

I wonder if our avoidance of death is embedded in our notion that to think of such things is depressing and morbid? Or has the culture so entered our DNA that we honestly believe if we buy the right gadgets, join the right gym, and have the best doctors in the world we might actually avoid death?

Lent is a crucial time to quiet the loud static of our life and look at things anew. We can perhaps strip away our own illusions about what our lives embody when we focus on minor irritations, frenetic busyness, electronic addictions, or success in our careers at all costs.

As I tried to reconcile myself to the feelings I had at the sudden death of my mother-in-law, I took an afternoon and went to a beautiful spot overlooking the Chattahoochee river. I wrote her a letter, thanking her for giving me Ron and the gift of our children. I thanked her for her generosity to us and the many places she had taken me that I had never seen before. I thanked her for her insistence that we all gather on birthdays, and I thanked her for her unpredictability that so called me to a new place of understanding what love and acceptance looked like. The sun warmed my hands as I wrote and I felt at peace.

Still, I have to wonder, what would it have been like if I could have told her these things while she was still with me?

Amen

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