

SMALL POTATOES

I've shared with you before about how, as a child of only seven years, I watched my family home burn down. Thankfully, everyone in my family made it out safely, and we were blessed with the support of both friends and strangers who provided support in the weeks it took for our house to be rebuilt. And through it all, my dad kept repeating how fortunate we all were, not only for the help we were getting, but more importantly, for the fact that we were all still alive. He reminded us that clothes and furniture could easily be replaced, but a human life could not. In his own way, he was seeing the loss of our house as *small potatoes* when compared to what we could have lost. All this wisdom from a man who grew up as an orphan on farms and never knew a real home, much less a family. But as his life progressed, he came to value the love of the family he helped create, the warmth of which could never be equaled with material things. In the grand scheme of things, the loss of his house was simply *small potatoes* and from a less urgent perspective than the loss of a family member. Recent natural disasters have also shown us how survivors view their losses in terms of their priorities. When asked in media interviews to express their feelings, a common response is that they're thankful that their families survived, commenting 'we can always build another house'.

Another term of comparison in our language is the phrase *mountains or molehills*. In our daily lives we use the concept of a mountain to describe a challenge we're facing, and the challenge can be of many kinds – health, financial, a relationship problem, accepting / rejecting a new job opportunity... and there's also the concept of molehills – [ask for comments on 'how do we determine the difference?') - can a mountain become a molehill? (after a good night's sleep; getting more information; taking a rest / break from whatever issue were struggling

with – don't need to do it all at once) Once again, whether we view something as a *mountain or molehill* can change according to the perspective from which we are looking at it and the anxiety we feel at the time.

Our scripture from Matthew this morning advises us not to worry about the future. While we might all agree that this advice is sound and practical, there may be times when our worry can actually be a positive motivator. In the October (2018) Reader's Digest, an article suggests the **potential** benefits of worrying (note that it says *potential*):

1. It protects you. The voice of worry can remind you to put on your seatbelt or check that you turned off the stove.
2. It motivates you. Facing a task, a little bit of worry lets you know what's important and might actually move you to prepare.

So while there can be *potential* benefit to worrying, it can also be a negative drain on our energy if we worry about something over which we have no direct control. Or if we set unrealistic goals for ourselves and fret when we can't attain them.

But the advice of Jesus to *not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will care for itself* bears a deeper look. People displaced by disasters may have a challenge taking this advice. In just the last few years we've seen TV news images of the thousands, and in some cases, millions of people who were evacuated from their communities to escape the life threatening wildfires, hurricanes and tornadoes heading their way. Who wouldn't worry at times like these, although many victims who are interviewed profess the perspective that *at least we're alive?* At the current moment in the U.S., there are still 1500 migrant children taken from their parents who cannot be accounted for by the government; in some cases, these children may well never be reunited with their parents. A radio news report I

heard this week told of an organization that has put this worry into action and is actively, albeit slowly, working to reunite these families. I cite these examples for two reasons:

1. to illustrate the resilience and strength of the human spirit, and
2. to help us put our own life and church issues into some perspective.

Are there those times when we lay awake at night worrying about something? It happens to me at times. But if we look at things with a different perspective, we can then decide which issues merit our action, and which are simply *small potatoes*. And we clearly do have choices! As our earlier story illustrated, we have *three* choices when adversity knocks.

1. Like the potato, we can become too soft and weak, and give up.
2. Like the egg, we can become hard, and stay in an unfeeling state.
3. Or, like the ground coffee, we can integrate our experiences toward a new outlook, and create a new and more life-affirming perspective.

As a congregation, we've come through a topsy-turvy ride this past year. Having believed and trusted in a new path forward, we've learned that it was not to be. And while we could mourn the several hundreds of hours we spent on the process, from our trustees, our council and our congregation, we can also look at it from another perspective. Thanks to last summer's flood and to our insurance coverage, our building is in even better shape than before. We've become even freer from our attachment to our building. And personally, thanks to the numerous sermons I've given over the past five years, depending on how we envisioned either closing or amalgamating with other churches, the chances are good that whatever comes next, I've probably already got a sermon for it! (At least it's good news for me...I'm not sure about how you feel.) And whatever happens with our building

in the future, it's not worth one minute of worry or lost sleep for any of us. And maybe this is where the scripture reading applies – there is *no point* in worrying about it. What will be will be.

And to put things into a different perspective, rather than mourn the hours we've spent in our lives on issues that bore no fruit, think of these countless numbers:

- a) How many days we've lived so far.
- b) How many hugs we've had.
- c) How many times we've laughed.
- d) How many sunsets we've enjoyed.
- e) You can develop your own list of your life's moments of beauty.

To conclude, when our worry motivates us to act, we need to act. When we worry needlessly, we can benefit from changing our perspective. My dad's wisdom also included the observation that, if we were all sitting in a large circle and threw our own problems into a pile in the middle...once we looked at all of them, we'd soon want our own back, seeing them as really *small potatoes*.

Brian Stocks. Westminster United Church. September 23, 2018.