

I SAMUEL 1:4-20

I SAMUEL 2:1-10

HEBREWS 10:11-14 (15-18), 19-25

MARK 13:1-8

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

November 14, 2021; Year B

Does Size Really Matter?

Morgan and Morgan is an injury law firm headquartered in Tampa, Florida, with offices in St. Petersburg, Jacksonville, Atlanta, and God only knows where else. Advertising prolifically on radio, television, and countless billboards, their relatively new ad campaign proudly declares and proclaims that “size matters” because they claim to be the largest law firm in the country. I do not doubt the legitimacy of their latest claim to fame! I must admit that their commercials are quite creative as they illustrate a variety of images all designed to prove their very colossal, supersized point. It seems that the prevailing attitude today is that bigger is always better! Go big or go home! One convenience store brags about their fountain soft drink size, calling them the “Big Gulp!” Sonic has certainly got into the craze as well! I come from the South where we pride ourselves on large portions when we eat! My hunch is that we southerners invented the buffet, put Golden Corral on the map. If you have never been, it is a food consuming orgy in action! The original Chic Fil A south of Atlanta is called the “Dwarf House,” complete with a diminutive arched doorway, so small that only a small child could walk through it. It is so very cute. The restaurant itself, however, is life-size! You would expect nothing less! We admire skyscrapers, amazed at the ability of architects to design them and construction workers to build them. Even in the ancient world, size mattered. Look at the pyramids! There would be nothing amazing or magnificent about them were they the size of an average house. We marvel at these great edifices of stone, each one cut to precision, and are bewildered at the seemingly unlimited storage capacity, great structures, the largest of spaces all

designed to accommodate seemingly unlimited artifacts hidden inside, so many appointed rooms to house the dead, furnished to the hilt! Oh, the value of these relics! Look at the ancient obelisks. Think of Stone Henge, a mysterious outcropping, produced by immensely careful planning, the movement and choreographed organization of those massively giant boulders all carefully put in place to stand the test of time. Here they stand, solidly remaining centuries later, a ginormous monument none the worse for wear! They will outlast us all, standing firmly entrenched, enconced on the very sacred spots on which they were strategically placed and positioned, a testimonial to some folks who were clearly, obviously deadly serious when it came to their devotional prowess as they conceived this magnificent monument to the unknown. These are but some of the many examples of larger-than-life creations that boggle the mind and continuously pique our curiosity.

In today's Witness from the Gospels in Mark we find the disciples all mesmerized by the mighty and magnificent, huge, colossal, ginormous, edifices, especially the grandest of them all, the Temple, each building's design no doubt a jaw dropping masterpiece, each one created in the hopes of capturing the imagination and embody and/or encompass what the faithful believed to be a God worthy of such grandeur, splendor, and opulence, all designed to boggle the mind. If you follow the bouncing ball of the lectionary, and even if you do not, we are continuing our story from last week which tells of the poor widow and her two cents worth. Small, very small! Oh, the irony of it all! Obviously, Jesus and his disciples had proceeded from their lofty vantage point as they observed from their perch the comings and goings of those who were dutifully, robotically, giving their offerings. Unlike any of you this morning! Soon after, they would enter the vast bowels of the Temple for worship. It is then, upon their exit, that the Markan writer picks up the story. One of the disciples exclaimed in anything but feigned amazement, "Look, Teacher, what large stones

and what large buildings!” Obviously, the Temple compound was created to create a jaw-dropping, overwhelming sense of amazement. After all, the erection of Solomon’s Temple took years to build, the dedication of countless craftsmen all committed to its construction. Jesus was not impressed! Once again, Jesus uses a random comment as a teachable moment, an object lesson to further his cause, to strengthen his mission and ministry as a Rabbi intent on changing the course of Judaism as it had come to be known and practiced. Jesus never seemed to take anything for granted, nothing left to chance, seeing in everything what could be, might be, or should be, always driving his radically loving, caring and compassionate, all encompassing, always inclusive, ever-expanding agenda driven by grace, mercy, and peace, never allowing the stagnation of status quo to dull his senses.

Now we have to remember that this conversation most probably, in all likelihood, never took place. I hope it does not come as a shock to any of you, but most of what Jesus is purported to have said in the Gospels, what some of us recall appearing in red letters in certain inferior translations, Jesus never said! There was no one taking notes, nobody with a handy clip board, dutifully recording verbatim for posterity the words of life as they were uttered from the master teacher’s lips! Most of the quotes attributed to Jesus were created during the first century by the early Church as it looked back on Jesus’ life and were trying desperately to make sense of it all, specifically in terms of the Judaism that formed and framed Jesus’ religious perspective. Interpretation and reinterpretation were clearly the order of their incredibly frantic, hectic, days during the height of their heaviest persecution, torture and terror their steady companion as they were martyred for the cause. Yes, the Gospels constituted the musings of the early Church, their interpretation, their understanding, their manipulation. After all, the Gospels were the latest, the last books composed that make up our canon of Christian scriptures. Always check

the dates! In the Bible, Hebrew and Christian narratives, never let chronology, the order of books, confuse you! They may appear first, but they are indeed last! And by the way, didn't Jesus say something about the first being last? Oh, that was about people, never mind! Jesus had now been dead for quite some time by the time of the Gospels were composed and thus, he certainly could not protest their twisting of his message. He could not protect or preserve his life legacy against their sudden need to meet their immediate needs, respond or react to current trends, to address their present realities. **Jesus is said to have said in response to the lone disciple's reflection, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down!"** You will remember that the second destruction of the Temple occurred in 70 CE and thus therein is the reason for these haunting words of doom and gloom, this conversation, conveniently placed in Jesus' and this unnamed disciple's mouth for posterity.

But me thinks there is a relevant word lurking in this rather somewhat bizarre story that really seems to amount to nothing if simply read at face value. In my estimation the fixation on mega-sized everything has impacted every area of our lives, including the Church. Not even the steeple is immune to the rising tide of everything having to somehow become larger than life. Now, I will admit that here in Eagle River the whole megachurch phenomenon really seems far away from our reality, not our problem, nowhere on the radar. This town is smaller than the average mega box church! Even so, my hunch is that if you were to visit certain local congregations you would probably experience many of the same dynamics germane to these huge box churches with their one size fits all theology. This largesse discussion reminds us that an obsession with bigger as better is now deeply rooted in our ecclesial culture. Happy-clappy, mind numbing music with a rock band beat, simple sermons called messages delivered by open collared gurus, highly opinionated shamans who tell you in detail what you must believe in order to believe and providing specific

tools, the most simplistic of ways for you to live and better your faith and yourself. And, oh the books that are mass produced, keeping literate ghostwriters busy! What a market! What a racket! What a sham! Questioning is strongly discouraged and there is little or no encouragement of diversity or deviation of thought. Just drink the proverbial Kool Aid and don't rock the boat! Intellectual curiosity and critical thinking are the stuff of the academy and not the local missional church or its pulpit, the place where theological inquiry should be expected and encouraged. The goal is to create as many faithful lemmings as possible, a citizenry who will blanket the country with a very one-sided, incredibly narrow, call it conservative, fundamentalist, or populist, version of the Christian message, Christendom hijacked to meet agendas that many in this room would no doubt find reprehensible. Yes, it is anything but progressive, the word "liberal" only spoken in hushed tones if at all.

I am not prone to much storytelling in my sermons, but my good friend Jill Bierwirth had this story to tell when she read my initial manuscript. I offer it verbatim! I think it worth our consideration in getting at the idea that I am trying to convey in today's sermon. It is called *The Failed Resurrection!* It speaks to volumes to the issues I want to address!

It was nearly dawn, and the end of my night shift as the only chaplain in the hospital would soon be over. 5 am: my pager went off, and I hurried to the 5th floor nurses station. There had been a death on the oncology ward. 40-year-old African-American female. Diagnosis: metastatic breast cancer.

After getting some additional background on the patient from the nurse, I went to the patient's room to wait for her sister to arrive. When the sister arrived, she immediately tossed her Bible into a chair and went to the bedside, without even glancing in my direction. I

remained silent, watching the drama that began to unfold. Beginning with the patient's legs, the sister picked up each appendage in turn and pumped it back and forth, as though providing physical therapy. And as she proceeded with her ritual, I began to wonder what this was about and why.

I quickly snuck out to the nurses's station again to look at the patient's chart for a religious affiliation. Apostolic. That is a faith healing tradition. Then I understood. The sister was working to pump life back into the patient's body. And as she continued her actions and silent prayers, she began to weep. Her attempted resurrection had failed.

I approached her then, expressed my sympathy, and asked if there was anyone I could call for her. She gave me the name and phone number of their pastor. I called him on my cell phone. We talked for a few minutes after I broke the news of the patient's death. He told me that this has been a sad situation from the start, because the sister was considered a powerful healer in their church, and therefore, the patient had refused treatment for her cancer, believing that if her faith was strong, big enough, God would use her sister to heal her disease. Yes, just how did that work out for you? Jill's painful story is a reminder that having the faith of a mustard seed will not move a mountain in any literal sense of that phrase, despite that assessment sounding good to the Gospel writer. Life experience has soberly taught us otherwise, that no matter our belief and faith, that we are subject to the laws, the principles of nature and the universe, a very real part of God's creative wisdom.

Like a good scotch or a good bourbon, I guess what I am advocating for today is some “small batch” Christianity, a faith that is more about questioning and nuance, the subtleties often commiserate with and that accompany any belief and faith, a belief system and accompanying faith that is real and relevant to life and living, far more than it is about answers and security, truth masquerading as fact. This sacred approach depends on organic growth and maturity about spiritual matters, spirituality, that values a devotion sensitive to the still small voice of the still speaking God and not the roaring, aggressive, awesome, deity proclaimed as a mighty and sovereign, warrior God, a powerful theistic deity sitting on a white throne dressed in a white robe, full of testosterone because “He” is a male in every divine respect. NOT! My hope as your pastor is to nurture your spiritual yearnings, to enhance and even expand your devotional life, to encourage you in your faith development, to nudge you toward honest inquiry about the sincere doubts you may be carrying, burdensome and perhaps overwhelming as they seem, real in every way, never to be dismissed or taken lightly. To support you with any perplexing misgivings that threaten, but in reality should enable and even empower and embolden your faith in God. The word that I heavily use these days is “progressive”, as in “progressive Christianity!” It is far more than a catch phrase! In all honesty, all the word progressive means and all the term contains, conveys, or encompasses is an honest approach to faith, the way we choose to engage the Bible as we take it seriously but not literally, along with the way we seek to follow the person of the historical Jesus, somewhat suspicious and perhaps even put off by the Christ created in the mind of the early Church, a subversive development and shameless promotion of a patriarchal system designed to suppress women and solidify a male dominated clergy and society. Yes, there are huge gaps, a great gulf fixed, between the person of the very real and very human Jesus of Nazareth, gracious, loving, peaceful and merciful in every way, juxtaposed against the judgmental Christ, a

divine arbiter, a figure concocted by the early Church and forced into and onto our Christian scriptures, all designed to manipulate, to keep innocent people in check, under control, controlling the frail and fragile psyches of the faithful, doling out blessings to the good and faithful believer, while condemning and guiltting the unrepentant sinner, the fear of hell always a breath away from those who waver from what surely was an aberration, a mutation of Jesus' gospel, what quickly became a newly minted, newly established party line. Yes, when we combine the name of Jesus with the title "Christ," just like we have always done, we have created and declared the ultimate oxymoron! Progressivism, in relation to our belief and faith, to use some Pauline language, calls us away from the milk of our narcissistic, me, me, and only me belief system, to fully embrace the meat of social justice toward all who are the other, to practice the way of Jesus in the way he engaged everyone he encountered. Being progressive demands that we embody a welcoming and including narrative, "extravagantly welcoming," expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and openly vulnerable regarding our neighbor. The prophet Micah once advocated that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God, responding to a question for the ages, "What does the Lord require of us?"

To relate to others intimately, personally, demands a mentality that is local, myopically, obsessively, passionately fixated on the needs of those who are near to us, yes, in close proximity. It should be our hope and prayer, our goal, that we present a very different, an alternative, Christian narrative in our local communities that is unapologetically inviting with no equivocation, no qualifications, no ifs, ands, or buts, that "no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here," and that means that you are welcome to be who God created you to be, just as you are. Yes, my friends, this continues throughout the country and around the world, to be the greatest challenge to Christendom, our unique, or so it seems, struggle as we

strive to trust, to respect, to accept and affirm the other. The more different someone appears to be, the more they should be embraced as a child of God, and that act can only happen when we are ready, willing, and able to understand and embrace that concept, that ideal, and act accordingly. Why is this level of acceptance and affirmation so difficult a thing to do for so many, sadly many who claim Christ as Lord? Yes, for some, it is easy, for others, not so much! For those who live in their insular world, surrounded by the comfort of their human familiar, it is indeed a palpable challenge, stretching them far beyond the comfort zones of the suffocating boxes they have created to protect themselves, giving them a heavy false sense of security, a mirage belying a feigned protection, all sensing, feeling, the survival trait that indeed haunts us all as human beings all the time.

The call to be the church is as simple as it is complex, but in many ways, we desperately need to get back to the basics and those baseline responses are simply grounded in loving people and finding ways to distance ourselves from the hype and all the dangerous doctrinal and subsequent creedal nonsense, biblical and theological psychobabble that is so destructive, so harmful, so injurious to the human spirit, all of which seems to have taken the contemporary, postmodern Church hostage, terrorizing the religious striving to be spiritual, tormenting and terrorizing the lives of many honest and sincere persons of faith trying to gain solid footing in their daily devotional life. Wow, what a mouthful! Let us at the First Congregational United Church of Christ of Eagle River, Wisconsin covenant together to be a safe space, a haven of trust, a place of warm and extravagant welcome, loving of all persons, allowing everyone the freedom and flexibility to question, to doubt, to scoff, to exhibit their most honest skepticism and even cynicism. May we be a place that values building beloved faith community one person, one soul, at a time, seeking to model the person of Jesus and not so concerned about the pyrotechnics and histrionics of the mythological

Christ of faith created by the early Church in their vainest attempts to describe the indescribable, explain the unexplainable, define the indefinable. Yes, let's be a "small batch" local missional church. And that has nothing to do with being small time even in a small town! Yes, size matters, except when it does not!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and is big enough, and indeed small enough, for all of us all the time. Amen and amen!