

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“In God’s Time”

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

I did a little research this week into how the average American spends their time. This is information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics from the year 2009. I found that the average American sleeps around 8 ½ hours per day. This seemed rather high but I guess that naps count. It seems that we spend a little over 5 hours a day for leisure and sports, including over half of that time watching television. Only 3 ½ hours a day are spent actually working. I hope our employers don’t know that. We spend an hour eating and drinking, about ¾ of an hour shopping, around 2/3 of an hour grooming (must be some teenage girls in that survey) and housework, and finally about 30 minutes each for cooking and caring for household members. A small percentage of each day is spent on caring for pets, volunteer work, and our spiritual life. An interesting analysis of our daily use of time!

I have also read somewhere that we spend six months of our life waiting at stoplights, eight months opening junk mail, one year looking for lost objects, five years waiting in lines, and two years trying to return phone calls. These statistics are dated so perhaps technology has made them better or worse.

This morning’s sermon topic was purchased at last fall church auction by Eric Brott. Eric triumphed in a spirited bidding war and we thank him for his generosity. Eric asked me to preach on the ancient passage of wisdom from the third chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes. You might know it better as the words to the Pete Seeger song immortalized by the Byrds, “Turn, Turn, Turn.” Eric said that he saw a PBS special in

which Judy Collins was singing the song along with Seeger and that he made his choice of Scripture from watching that early 1960's video. I think he made an excellent choice!

The author of the words was a teacher, a man of wisdom, apparently a young man who deeply considered the flow of events within the span of a lifetime and questioned the meaning of all human activity against the measurement of time. He writes, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven." We love these words and if the teacher's writing would have ended there, I probably wouldn't be preaching this sermon today. But he continues in the very next chapter, and in several other places in the rest of the book. "I have considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity, a chasing after the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun." I read somewhere this week that he mentions "vanity" over thirty times in this book. Clearly he is skeptical of his life's duties and actions. It is with these words that the young teacher lifts up the important question of the meaning of all of our time, our work, and our planning. Where does it lead us? What is the significance of what we do? What is the importance of how we use our time?

I watched with great interest my daughter Amelia cleaning out her closet in her room a couple of weeks ago. First of all it was very unusual, a teenage girl cleaning anything in her room. But she was doing a wonderfully thorough job. She emptied her closet out of all her old clothing, things that didn't fit and things that she just wouldn't be caught wearing anymore. She's definitely got a head start on this spring's rummage sale! Secondly, as she was cleaning it I couldn't help but wonder about the fate of this year's Christmas gifts. Would the clothes she received as Christmas gifts this past year be the victims of next year's closet cleaning? What was once so promising and new is now forgotten and useless! Does anything we purchase truly appreciated before we move on to the next thing? Is that the way we handle our days and hours and minutes, using them for our advantage and then kicking them to the curb?

I had a similar feeling walking into the Hallmark store, looking for an anniversary card for Laura on December 28. I was surprised to see most of the store shelves already empty. The Christmas cards were gone. The clerks were busy putting up decorations and cards for Valentine's Day. The days of the year seem like more a meaningless rat race than significant celebrations. We hardly pause before we move on to whatever might be next.

I read some comments of a college professor who said, "About half of what we know today will be, in about twenty years, not only dated, but wrong." Talk about chasing after the wind! And our children will not even know some of the things we found or find as commonplace: newspapers and magazines, writing a check, libraries with books on the shelves, road maps, phone books, and wires. Something else has or will soon take their place. It makes one wonder about the importance of anything we value today, including time.

While some people might label the ancient teacher the ultimate cynic- all is vanity and life is chasing the wind, there is some holy wisdom for us to gain in reading and reflecting upon his words. He offers some rather practical advice: "Be happy and enjoy yourself as long as you can." I tend to look at this theologically. Since there are so many things in life that we cannot control, it is wise for us to maintain a positive mind and look for those things which bring us joy. Part of the act of thanksgiving is the enjoyment of the good gifts of our God.

But the author of Ecclesiastes also gives another prescription for the living of life. As human beings we tend to see time as a problem to be solved. We attack it, we try to seize it, and we try to squeeze every drop of pleasure and usefulness out of it before we call it good. We try to make it our time, something that will be lasting. And when we fail, we tend to see our work as useless, our time as wasted, and our lives as something approaching vanity.

The ancient teacher said that as human beings we are always and forever to stand in respect for God. All things in life have a proper place. Our labor, our yearning, and our worry will not change that. The answer lies in maintain a proper reverence and acceptance of life on its own terms, joy as well as sorrow. The answer lies in seeing the gift of time through the eyes of the one who is the author of time. The answer lies in understanding and using each minute as God's time.

There is a story of a student who asked his teacher, "Where shall I find God in life?" The holy one responded, "God is with you everywhere." The student was puzzled. "But if that is true, why can't I see this presence?" The teacher replied, "Because you are like the fish who when in the ocean, never notices the water."

Real spirituality is when we find the sacred nature of each and every moment. We cannot ignore anything in life, whether we are controlling it or not, or whether we find purpose in it or not. Things happen. And God is in each and every thing that happens. Life's purpose is to enjoy each and every part-the silly and the sad, the exhilarating and the exhausting, the empty and the full.

In his book *The Sabbath*, Abraham Heschel writes about the concept of sabbath as an attitude toward time, an attitude that is not to be used simply on Sunday or whatever day one would set aside to honor God. Sabbath is when we as human beings recognize the holiness in time. Sabbath is not a festival or event. It is not a block of free time to do whatever brings us pleasure. It is a celebration of the meaning of time. Where normally our reality is "thinghood, .., substances that occupy spaces, sabbath is recognizing that it is not things that make time meaningful but the presence of God in each and every moment. That is what makes time holy. That is what makes life holy.

Theologian Paul Tillich writes, "What is the meaning of our toiling and planning when the end of us all and all our works is the same? Vanity? And this is the answer we get: within our time something happens that is not of our time but out of eternity, and this times *our* time! The same power which limits us in time give eternal significance to our time." In other words, while each moment of our life may be timed and limited, sometimes apparently lived out in vanity, each moment of our life is also part of the eternal process that has lasting significance because it is part of God's relationship with creation.

William Willimon writes of a man who is a fine woodworker. He built a simple but beautiful chair with his own hands. Someone, impressed by the sturdy nature of the chair commented, "Boy, I bet that chair lasts forever." The woodworker replied, "I doubt it will last forever. I just want it to be the best I can do today."

The forever part of life's significance belongs to God. But we must live knowing that God is present and working in the time we have here and now. Perhaps what we need to strive for is to be the best we can be today with this gift of time God has given. We can keep working and playing, learning and serving, confident in the goodness of God to make our life much more than we alone can make it.