

## **Fullness of Time and The Reign of God on Earth”**

Sermon by the Rev. Joe Summers for 11/06/11. The First Sunday after All Saints.

(Readings: Wisdom 6:17-20, Wisdom 6:12-16, Revelation 7:9-17, Matthew 5:1-12)

Jesus invited people to experience paradise, heaven on earth, creation illumined from within. His good news was that it was possible to experience and participate in the reign of God on earth, the realm in which God’s will, as it is expressed in the beatitudes which we heard today, is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Though Jesus spoke of the reign of God in terms of the “Kingdom of God,” he recognized this was a metaphor that didn’t necessarily help people understand what he was talking about. Thus we see him use a wide variety of metaphors and parables to talk about this reality: “With what can we compare the Kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is as if...” (Mark 4:26-40) In one of our recent spirituality group discussions we talked about what metaphors best describe our own experience of this reality. Some of the metaphors they mentioned were: the beloved community, the generativity of nature, the mystery of the Spirit, that place where heaven and earth are one, the experience of presence, being fed and feeding people. Similarly we see various New Testament authors preferring different metaphors. Matthew prefers the image of the “Kingdom of Heaven” to Mark’s and Luke’s image of the “Kingdom of God.” John prefers the image of “eternal life”--that is the place where life, rather than death, reigns in the midst of life. Paul speaks of “being in Christ.”

This very variety of metaphors testifies to the struggle to find words to introduce people to an experience that is, I think, what draws us to church, and yet some of us have never known and many more of us seem to experience only rarely. In the next three weeks I want to talk about some of the barriers that keep us from experiencing this reality and how we can overcome them.

Salvation is the gift of life no longer under the dominion of death, life freed from the various ways that death tries to reign in our lives through things like fear, guilt, anger, apathy, shame, meaninglessness, addiction, and violence. Speaking of salvation, St. Francis said “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” One of the great paradoxes is that, while salvation is ultimately a gift, something we receive, rather than something we do or create, giving is part of the doorway to receiving this gift. So this week I want to talk about giving in relationship to time; next week giving in relationship to money; and the following week giving in relationship to our bodies.

Part of what got me thinking about salvation in relationship to time was our alternative gospel for today which is the story of the ten virgins who are sent out to greet a bridegroom. The wise ones bring extra oil to light their lamps. The foolish ones don’t. The result is they have to go back home and miss the bridegroom when he shows up. He in turn is not a very nice fellow who, when they show up late, locks them out of the wedding banquet claiming to not know them.

It's a story I've never particularly liked, but this week I found it speaking to me about how our relationship to time seems to have everything to do with whether we show up for the Feast of Life, or whether we miss it. That is, our relationship to time is one of the places where I see us lose heart, lose our souls, lose our minds, become disconnected from our bodies, all of which are fundamentally related to whether or not we experience the Feast of Life.

If Jesus spoke again and again about our relationship to money having everything to do with whether or not we experienced the communion of the beloved, 19th and 20th Century philosophers and religious thinkers have seen our relationship to time posing a similar issue. Edwin Muir wrote a poem about the 20th century, which he called "Time Wars." I'm not crazy about the poem, but I think the title itself gets to the heart of what has undergirded so much of the barbarity of our modern world. So much of our failure to be there for one another and to stand up to the great evils of our time, has to do with being fragmented selves, selves that are fragmented because of our relationship to time.

Rooted in a sense of the scarcity of time, we live in opposition to it. At times we view time as an enemy who is over us, or after us. Other times we treat time as a slave who should serve us. Often you can see a parallel between how people relate to their money and how they relate to time.

The challenge we face today is whether we are going to learn what saving wisdom has to teach us about how to live in relationship to time, or whether we are going to be like the foolish who miss our lives because, again and again, we are busy, disconnected, when life's key moments of connection are presented to us. We are simply not there, when others, or our community, needs us to be with them until the hour of hell passes, or just to share the joy of ordinary daily life.

If, as I would suggest, it is foolish to treat time like an object, to try to save time by continually making short cuts or fragmenting ourselves, what does saving wisdom have to say to us about living in relationship to time?

First, I think wisdom would have us know fullness of time, for our ability to experience fullness of time has a lot to do with whether or not we are able to experience eternal life, or presence, or whatever else we want to call it. John's gospel says, it is from the experience of God's fullness, "that we receive grace upon grace." (John 1:16). I would suggest that a key factor in terms of whether or not we are able to experience the fullness of God has to do with whether or not we are able to experience the fullness of time. It is in the fullness of time that we most powerfully experience God's presence.

What is fullness of time? It's not about having a long life. It's about time slowing down. For me it's something like what some sports players talk about when they say that there are times when everything seems to slow down, so they can really see even a fast ball coming at them, or when it appears that somehow everyone is moving slower and the basket suddenly seems much larger.

How can we experience fullness of time? We think that by saving time, by taking short cuts, by multi-tasking, by micro managing how we spend every minute, we'll have more time. But time only gets thinner and thinner. But the Jesus story suggests that experiencing fullness of time comes not through trying to save it, but through spending time.

Jesus whole public ministry lasted only three years, and yet what we read is that one person after another had an encounter with him that was life transforming. If Jesus knew where his journey was leading, and everything suggests he did, you might think he might want to hoard what little time he had left. Instead he seems to give himself fully to whatever and whoever he encounters. In the midst of quickly going from one place to another, again and again, we see time apparently stand still, as Jesus really meets someone and responds to whatever they are needing, or wherever they are.

Time is one of the most precious gifts we can give one another. When you think of those people who have sustained and renewed us, brought us more fully into life, again and again it is those who gave us their full attention. Fullness of attention is transforming. It allows connections to happen, sometimes even in a few minutes, that hours, days, and weeks of the kind of fragmented attention that we tend to give one another may never create.

Giving time fully, is something we see Jesus do not only for others, but for himself and for God. In the midst of thousands pursuing him, needing him, Jesus takes time apart. He takes time to be by himself, to be quiet, to be alone. He takes time to pray. Spending that kind of time on himself, creating that kind of space for God, gives him the power to calm life's stormy oceans.

Just as there is a discipline of the heart in being there for those who are in need, which I heard this past week is part of the discipline of Alcoholics Anonymous, there is a discipline of the heart in regularly taking time to reconnect to oneself and to God. We hear it in the traditional acclamation: "Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen." World without end-- you can breath. Dwelling in this view of time enables you to give the gift of time to others.

I've met a few people who, I believe, the church will eventually canonize as Saints. They include Bishop Tutu and Dorothy Day. One of the great things about being around them was watching them as they devoted time to those who sought them out. It would have been easy for them to feel like they didn't have time to talk to people, because people like them are asked to do everything by everyone and are therefore behind in everything. Instead they seemed always willing to meet people where they were and talk to even those who didn't know what it was they were needing to talk about. I believe the discipline of being rooted in the fullness of time gives you this kind of freedom.

I have spoken about the relationship between experiencing the Feast of Life and giving time to others, time to ourselves, and time to God, but I want to end by speaking of salvation in relationship to giving ourselves to time in worship.

Alice Walker wrote that “Without the voices of our ancestors we become thin as ghosts.” If your sole focus is on getting from point A to point B, you are likely not to be able to see the living, let alone hear the dead. It is one of the reasons why liturgical time, time as we spend it in worship, is so important to me. Our liturgy and our scriptures are a cacophony of the voices of our ancestors and, in their voices, there is so much wisdom, rooted in thousands of years of experience, if we’ll take the time to really listen to them and how God is speaking to us through them.

As a child I hated how slowly time moved in church. For me as an adult this very slowness feels incredibly rich. The practice of slowing down to the point that I know I have an appointment with my heart every Sunday morning structures my whole life. It’s my time to re-establish my relationship to the universe and to myself. But the God space that’s created here is not just for me, or us, I think it is one of the most important gifts we have to give others and to the world.

Over time I’ve seen how it is in and through our liturgy together that the poor in spirit, those suffering the desolation of fear, despair, wrath, shame and loneliness--come to experience the Kingdom of Heaven. How, through our worship together, those who mourn are comforted. How, through our worship together, the meek are empowered. How, through our worship together, righteousness and justice are nourished. How, through our worship together, the merciful receive mercy and peacemakers come to know themselves as children of God. How, through our worship together, others come to know the peace, joy, and wisdom of the communion of the saints and the power of God, working through those who believe. How, through our worship together, fragmented communities and fragmented selves become whole communities and whole selves and, through slowly learning to love with all our heart, mind, and soul, come to see God. It’s not simple. It’s not automatic. But it happens when we show up for God and for one another.

So today I invite you, my sisters and brothers, to relax into the fullness of time, to bathe in the warmth, light and love of the communion of the saints, this vast net that was and is and ever shall be, there to hold us and sustain us, now and all ways.

For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.