

Wasting Time for God

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July 9, 2006

Scripture readings: Luke 17:20-21, 18:15-17, 19:1-10

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The seed for this sermon germinated out of frustration. The frustration, however, eventually lead to a journey that, in the end, surprised me.

For those of you that don't know me, my name is Mary Anderson. I am the lay Youth Ministry Team Leader for this church which means that I get to hang out with teenagers here, learning as much from them, if not more, than they learn from me. I also have an incredibly devoted Youth Team committee as well as many others that are involved in Christian Education and Logos, as well as our minister, Chip Fisher. All are committed to the spiritual growth and over all well-being of the children and young adults of this church and beyond.

Part of my frustration came from the information I have been learning over the past year with regard to youth. The other part came from recent attempts to schedule events. I have willing adults and willing teenagers who all are experiencing busy lives, for various good reasons. In reality, this sermon is more about the speed at which we are racing, here in the thick of the Southern California rat race, myself included. As a matter of fact, this sermon reminds me of one of my mother's frequent sayings when we were young: "Do as I say, not as I do."

This year and last, I have classes in Youth Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary, as well as, attending the Princeton Forum on Youth Ministry. I have read books by brilliant theologians like Henri Nouwen, Brad Kallenberg, Walter Brueggeman, Donald Posterski, Richard Peace, Craig Van Gelder and Chap Clark. Many experts agree that we are living in a post modern world that brings with it a different set of morals and priorities. Consumerism is "king" and God is being pushed further and further out of the picture. Although I, like many of us, am an advocate for teenagers, this research really affects and applies to all of us. I have been exposed to thoughts and ideas such as these:

Chap Clark is associate professor of youth, family and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary. In his book, Hurt – inside the world of today’s Teenagers, he says: “Some researchers believe that culture has changed so quickly that the developmental, societal, and relational needs of children have been neglected in recent decades and that by the time children reach adolescence they have been left on their own to attempt to navigate the path toward adulthood.”

In this church, I see only a willingness to care deeply for the little ones on up through our senior ministry, but I also know that we are called to be alert to those that have fallen through the cultural cracks outside our immediate sphere.

Clark goes on to say: “Young people are desperate for an adult who cares. Certainly, some adolescents have been so wounded that rebuilding trust may appear almost insurmountable. Yet those who serve them with tenderness and respect will testify that even the hardest young soul cries out for someone who authentically cares.”

With regard to school, Clark observed: “The bulk of the students I observed, especially those that were active and involved, were often exhausted, harried, and frazzled. There seemed to be little apparent systemic consideration for what these schedules, expectations, and pressures do to the development and health of midadolescents.” Observing our senior high on Sundays in the senior lounge, I too, have seen that they are often really tired after a long week. They often enter the classroom and sprawl out on top of the bean bags, immobile for a few minutes while everyone gathers. “As one student at Yale Political Union astutely noted, the system doesn’t necessarily reward brains; it rewards energy. The ones who thrive are the ones who can keep going from one activity to another, from music, to science, to sports, to community service, to the library, and so on without rest. To get into a competitive school, you need a hyperactive thyroid as much as high intelligence.”

Perhaps we hurry to accomplish, but what and for who? Chap Clark concludes his thoughts on busyness and stress by saying: “May we, the adults who love and care for them (the adolescents), not be fooled. They are busy, yes, and stressed, but they want someone to demonstrate in word and action, “You matter to me.”

More and more, in my personal encounters, I am convinced, that meaning happens when we stop rushing. Meaning happens when we shift gears. When we commit.

When we stop our plans and hear that inner voice nudging us to go in a different direction than we had planned.

As people of faith, I believe that we are called to be informed with regard to professional sociological studies, but not to be engulfed in the stress that disturbing statistics produce. As we have learned, over and over, through the years, this is, indeed, a broken realm.

I recently had a wonderful encounter with a Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka named Bonti. I asked him if he thought that the world was moving faster than ever. He said, “No, the world, and even the universe, is not moving faster.” Then he laughed and added, “Maybe the people are, though.” The next day, it made me realize that this was quite true. The whales are not migrating faster, and the birds are not singing at a faster speed and the flowers are certainly not growing faster. But, somewhere along the line, especially we Americans, have decided that fast is good.

For some reason, during the industrial revolution, we began to think that speed is everything. We need to scramble to be first in all that we do. Today, in the industrialized world, Americans, generally speaking, have the shortest vacation time and the shortest lunch hours and the amount of fast food that we consume is staggering. We rush to get to work and rush to get home, often to greet the kids and mom who are in turn rushing to get to the next activity. Weekends are spent rushing to the various sports.

Several years ago, my child development instructor and mentor, Marion Walters, said that Americans first began to push children in the 1950's after the Russians, on October 4, 1957, successfully launched the Russian Sputnik satellite into space. Russia became the first space power. Americans decided that we were in trouble if we didn't begin to move at a faster speed. We needed to get smart quick. Soon after, books were published in the United States, with titles such as, Your Child Can Learn To Read at Age 2. We have been pushing ever since.

What if we already *are*, who we are supposed to be. Of course, we want to grow and learn and become more and more disciplined in all that we do, but it doesn't mean that we have to race to do it.

A few days ago, I ran into my dear faith sister, Carol Griset, who is one of our own advocates for the littlest members of Community Church. “What's the topic of your

sermon?” Carol asked. “Basically, it’s about hurrying and stress,” I said. “Hurrying is toxic for little children,” she said. “They don’t even know what “hurrying” means. They only know the feeling of stress that it produces in adults.”

In my own experience here at Community Church, I have learned that meaningful encounters, like loving relationships, are gifts from God. Often meaningful encounters happen when we are least expecting them. They rarely follow an agenda. For me, over the past year, meaningful conversations have come when I’m not in a hurry. As a matter of fact, they seem to show up when I appear to be wasting time, like hanging around on the couches, after class, to talk to those teenagers that didn’t have to rush off or driving in a car on a highway somewhere in Baja, or goofing off with friends on the floor with the Logos kids or by taking time to get together with the people that we love and share a meal or walk. Am I actually taking time out from my daily agenda of accomplishments or is it the other way around? By wasting what I consider to be accomplishment time, am I really adding the layers of meaning that make up a life?

M. Scott Peck, the author of The Road Less Travelled and The Road Less Travelled and Beyond – Spiritual growth in an age of anxiety, studied many individuals in the 1970’s who had experienced near death experiences. As the expression goes, many saw their lives passing in front of their eyes. But, contrary to what they would expect to be important, they reported that they observed small encounters that they had forgotten about, like acts of kindness or generosity or encouragement - the seeds of which produced profound results. Peck says: “The whole course of human history may depend on a change of heart in one solitary and even humble individual - for it is in the solitary mind and soul of the individual that the battle between good and evil is waged and ultimately won or lost.” He goes on to say: “Until you value yourself, you won't value your time. Until you value your time, you will not do anything with it.”

We are born into this world with a certain allotment of time, never knowing how much. I decided to take this question of how time needs to be spent to the one that I consider to be the real expert, Jesus of Nazareth via the Gospel of Luke. We’re not sure if our Thursday morning Bible study holds the record, but it took us 2 years and a very patient leader to get through the Gospel of Luke, quite a few years back. For some reason, there is always more to be discovered. By rereading the Gospel of Luke, I realize,

as it turns out, that Jesus is radical with his use of time, not in the political sense, but rather, in the unpredictable sense. He remains off the charts in more ways than I can name.

For this sermon, I spent a week in the Gospel of Luke, walking with the disciples toward Jerusalem observing Jesus. What did he accomplish in his ministry and what “fruit did he bear?”

Accomplishment is a secular word. In religious terms, we speak of bearing fruit. Accomplishment is self-driven and bearing fruit comes from ultimate trust in a power that is beyond our comprehension. Sometimes “fruit” is not visible at the time of its inception, just like it’s hard to pin-point the exact time that you fall in love or bond deeply with a friend or begin to adore the child in your womb.

So how does Jesus handle stressful situations and busyness, and in particular, how does he spend his allotment of time?

The first thing that I noticed was how much Jesus prayed. Maybe I hadn’t noticed the first time around or maybe I hadn’t seen the Gospel of Luke in its entirety before. He used a very large allotment of time for prayer. As we all know, he began his ministry praying, fasting and wandering in the wilderness for 40 days led by the Spirit and tempted by the devil. I think that most people’s attitude toward prayer probably falls into three categories. Those that think that prayer is a waste of time, those that think prayer is probably valuable but they can’t afford the time and those that can’t organize their time without prayer. I used to hover around in category one until life became hard enough that I switched categories. Now I vacillate between categories two and three, always desirous of becoming a solid three.

Jesus cleared the temple to create a place of prayer. Once he reached Jerusalem and was often surrounded by crowds, he retreated each night to the Mount of Olives to rest and pray surrounded by olive trees, sounds of the night and the Spirit. He taught his disciples to pray without ceasing. He told them that they should keep on praying and never lose heart.

Jesus often seemed to be wasting time from an outside perspective. In the case of Mary and Martha, it was unheard of to waste time by discussing theology with women. They could never be priests. We know how the story goes. Martha was annoyed at Mary

for sitting at the feet of Jesus when there was so much work to be done. In his book, The Believer's Road, Bruce Van Blair says: "Even after all these years, part of us still wants to side with Martha, and to resent Mary. Getting the work done, after all, is still more important than seeking truth, in the "real" world. A friend of mine says, "We still think we are supposed to be human doings instead of human beings." Also noteworthy, is the fact that often someone gets annoyed when we waste time for God. Martha, in this case, is a case in point.

In the scripture reading in Luke 18:15, the disciples are about to set off to Jerusalem with Jesus. The Pharisees are looking for ways to corner Jesus on a technicality and have him arrested. Tension is high. Enter some mothers with babies hoping that Jesus will touch and bless them. This time, it is the disciples' turn to become annoyed. The disciples see the mothers and rebuke or sharply criticize them. So what does Jesus do? He says: "Let the children come to me; do not try to stop them; for the kingdom of God belongs to these. Truly I tell you: Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." Jesus will not be hurried, ever. He wants to stop, bless and experience these young children because he is able to see their importance to God. May we all remain as open as these little children. And if we forget what that openness looks like, we only need to ask to be invited into Miss Nola and Miss Carol's classroom one Sunday morning, for a refresher course.

Now it's the disciples, once again, that are very confused by Jesus' priorities and his use of time. There are miles to go and important people to see. Little children are even less important than women. What is he thinking?

In the next scripture reading in Luke 19, Jesus and the disciples are making their way up through Jericho and we encounter a man named Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is a wealthy superintendent of taxes and despised by the community for his dishonesty. The crowd is so large that Zacchaeus, being short, cannot see Jesus. Zacchaeus is so excited to try and see this man called Jesus that he climbs a sycamore tree to have a better look. Jesus is so present to the moment that, even through the crowd, he notices Zacchaeus' enthusiasm. Not only that, but tells Zacchaeus that today is the day that he will be a guest in Zacchaeus' home. Everyone who saw this encounter was indignant. Jesus is "wasting" time with this sinner. Why would Jesus bother to talk to a dishonest man? Zacchaeus, of

course, is so taken back that he repents for every sin that he has ever committed on the spot, promises to give half of his income to the poor and if he is ever caught cheating again, he will pay four times the damages. Once again Jesus throws us for a loop. The more tension builds, the more time he takes, unharried. Everyone would like to know what Jesus and Zacchaeus talked about that night. And we can only wonder what happened in the life of Zacchaeus.

Later, in Chapter 22, Jesus “wastes” his last allotment of time on earth, before his crucifixion, at the last supper. He says to his disciples: “How I have longed to eat this Passover with you before my death.” Talk about a loving statement. Jesus is in the moment. He has longed to eat with his friends. Nothing is more important to him at the end than eating a meal with his friends. I find this frame of mind unbelievable, only from my perspective, not his.

So what did Jesus accomplish in his ministry. In the outer world of accomplishments, Jesus healed some people, turned some water into wine (for one night) and fed five thousand (for one day). The “fruit” of his time here on earth, however, is another story. He invested time and love teaching 12 disciples, in particular, and many other people along the way. He invested time and love teaching several women. There were many Marys. Mary, his mother, Mary Magdala, Mary, Martha’s sister and Mary, the mother of James, unless that is Jesus’ mother and someone called the other Mary. I forgot to ask Chip about keeping them all straight. Jesus was travelling with not only the twelve, but also some women who had been healed of various evil afflictions and illnesses; Mary, the one called Magdalene; Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s manager; and Susanna and others who used their means to provide for the group.

Mary Magdala had seven demons removed. In ancient language, that means all of her demons were removed. Most demons live between our two ears and are commonly referred to as the way in which we think. I believe that the experiences that she encountered along her path prior to her encounter with Jesus had wrecked havoc on her self esteem. Of course, I can’t prove that, but it’s a pretty strong hunch and maybe a little projection. Anyway, I find it fascinating that popular culture senses something important about her, but they can’t take it any farther than assuming that she is the wife of Jesus and mother of his son. That, once again, leaves the importance of what she learned from

Jesus, out of the picture all together. She was one of his disciples, not his wife. She carried forth the message, along with the other disciples. Everyone knows that we women have been given the gift of gab. When it used for ill, it can be devastating, but when it is used for good, there is no stopping the way it will spread.

By investing time, when it was least expected, in a radical fashion and by loving and teaching people, one at a time, Jesus changed the course of history and although many have used the name of Christianity for their own power and greed, the true transformational essence is still available to each of us today.

Worry and anxiety were as prevalent two thousand years ago as they are today. We were given free will. It's up to us to decide how we want to spend our allotted time here, where we want to receive guidance, and what legacy we want to leave behind for our children.

I was frazzled with concern over statistics when I began to write this sermon. Now it has disappeared. In the process, I was reminded, that the only person that I am truly able to change is myself. I only need to race if I choose to. I only need to feel harried, if I choose to race. I can choose to pray or not. I can choose to tithe my time and conversation or not. Jesus says: "You cannot say, "Look, here it is," or "There it is!" For the kingdom of God is among you!" There are places that provide sanctuaries from the stresses of daily life, but there are also people in our lives that provide sanctuaries, as well. We need to find more time to "waste" together for God, not less, deepening the love that gives us strength.

Let us take a few moments in silent prayer.

Amen.

Call to Worship

Out in front of us is the drama of men and of nations, seething, struggling, laboring, dying. Upon this tragic drama in these days our eyes are all set in anxious watching and

in prayer. But within the silences of the souls of men an eternal drama is ever being enacted, in these days as well as in others. And on the outcome of this inner drama rests, ultimately, the outer pageant of history. It is the drama of the Hound of Heaven baying relentless and lonely, feebly searching, while over the hills comes the wiser Shepherd. For He is a shepherd's heart, and He is restless until He holds His sheep in His arms. It is the drama of the Eternal Father drawing the prodigal home unto Himself, where there is bread enough and to spare. It is the drama of the Double Search, as Rufus Jones calls it. And always its chief actor is – the Eternal God of Love.

A reading from A Testament of Devotion by Thomas R. Kelly

