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“Kairos Time”

The spring of 2001 was one of those pivotal times in my life. There is no anniversary that I celebrate, no particular date, no grand occasion; but a series of events that marked an enormous shift in how I live my life.

It started in January, 2001, and it was just one of those months. I knew before it ever started that it was going to be busy; but, what I didn't know is that it would spill over into February, and early March. I was the solo pastor of a small church and I was determined to do a worship series that involved using PowerPoint. And not only was I new to PowerPoint which meant that it took hours more to put together the service each week; but, also the church did not own a projector and screen so there was time spent each week getting and returning equipment to the Presbytery offices. Then there was my decision that my old laptop could not handle all the files and so there was the whole thing of getting a new computer, learning to use new software, transferring files from one computer to the other, working out the bugs, loading printer software, and on and on.

Again, this was a small church and I was the only staff. Being this was January, there were new elders and deacons to train, an annual meeting to plan for, and we had formed a visioning team with which I was participating.

It was a lot, but, then my mom, who lived five doors down from me, got a bad cold and there was a Presbytery redevelopment training conference that I had signed up to attend and was too stubborn to back out of. And just when I thought I was beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel, my younger son, Clayton, developed mononucleosis.

Now, I had always considered myself as someone who liked to be busy. It is what our culture teaches us, of course: if you want to get something done, you give it to a busy person. I was a busy person, and, if I am honest about it, proud of the fact. As Wayne Muller, who will join us in October for a Sabbath retreat, notes, “We wear our busyness like a badge of accomplishment to the extent that it does violence to our spirits.” I was to learn this was true!

In my own defense, I had long since developed some habits of taking time. For me, “busy” usually meant within a framework. Assumed in my definition of busy was daily time with God and family, assumed in my definition of busy was a Sabbath. What I came to realize was that I took this time only AFTER everything else. But in January and February, I spent Sabbath days returning equipment to the Presbytery and figuring out why my new computer kept cutting out on me. I spent my daily quiet time, scanning hurriedly for liturgical texts and pictures that suited the sermon. And while my family spent time together I put together slide shows.



Nothing dramatic happened; but, sometime in February I developed bronchitis and the cough would not go away. I was exhausted and gradually became a bit down, and my family assured me, irritable. But it was more than exhaustion, somewhere in there I lost all sense of the transcendent, all sense of being grounded in the divine. I felt unmoored, un-tethered, detached, and very much alone in the world.

I got through all of the things I had to do and exhausted and still sick, I took some time and started to reflect deeply on what had happened. I came to realize that my taking Sabbath and quiet times only seemed to apply when I had time for it. For the first time in my life, that spring I thought about the true nature of time: What it is? How we spend it? Why it is such an issue in our culture?

The temptation is, of course, to talk about how we can schedule our time so that we do have time for Scripture and Sabbath rest and family. Those are critically important issues, but the real context has to do not with how we schedule time or how much time we have, but rather the quality of our time. And by “quality of time” I am not talking about quality time in the same way that folks speak of my generation speak of quality time with their children when they really are just feeling guilty for not spending enough time with their children. And I am not talking about the quality of what happens in the time, but rather the quality or nature of the time itself.

The Greek language has two words for our one word, “time.” So in your bible when you see the word “time” it could be either one of them. The first word is *chronos*, as in chronology or chronological. It means, as you may guess from its derivatives, clock time, linear time: seconds and minutes and hours and days put together in a meaningful, sequential, linear order.

It is in the context of *chronos* that my life back in the winter and early spring of 2001 had been topsy turvy. Chronos time marches on in a straight linear path and we are either on the path or we have missed it. Time as they say, waits for no man or (as I have learned) woman. Most of us live our lives by the clock, controlled by the demands on our time and without giving much thought to the big and little choices that we make day in and day out that end up determining how our time is spent. Annie Dillard wrote that “how we spend our time is, of course, how we spend our lives.” And, of course, she is right.

It was easy for me to look back over those months and say that my work was just taking so much of my time, that Clayton and mom were sick and that was a drain on my time. But the fact is that I chose to do the sermon series, even after I knew that meant working with a new computer and having to lug equipment to and from the Presbytery. It suited my image of being good at my job. I chose to take Mom to certain doctor appointments and to do some things for her even though had we not moved her just a couple of years before, she would have gotten them done just fine on her own. It suited my image of being a good daughter. And I chose to not leave Clayton alone much when he was sick even though he was fifteen years old and capable of caring for himself—without his mother .

So one of the things that may be obvious is that I sometimes take things on even when they are not necessary because I had a need to live up to some very high expectations



for myself or because I didn't want to feel guilty or because maybe I thought that no one else could do them, at least not like I could, or to my satisfaction.

Those were my excuses. My ego, pride or stubbornness, or my sense of propriety gets in the way of my real, essential priorities: my relationship with God and myself, not to mention my own health. Ultimately I got frazzled, my usual sense of joy and peace were lost and I felt isolated from God. So, those are my excuses and I invite you to consider, if you really looked at it closely, what would your excuse be for being too busy for God? Because, the reality is that we have a whole lot more control over what gets accomplished in the march of our days and weeks than we are willing to confess.

It was easier for me to say that I did not have time during that period to take a Sabbath or for daily quiet times than to acknowledge that I made decisions that indirectly placed God down the ladder on my priority list below my need to feel that I was doing the right thing, below my need to feel that I was doing my job really well, below my need to feel that I was indispensable to my son or my mom. Well, essentially below my ego. And while I could make excuses that I was after all doing ministry and caring for the sick, the fact is that is just an excuse for having made some very egocentric decisions.

So there I was back in March of 2001, exhausted, physically ill, and feeling very alone, detached from God. And as I finally took some time off to reflect on what had gone wrong, one of the comforts that I found was with the lesson that the author of Ecclesiastes gives to us. "To every thing there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven." And the meter of the author's verse teaches us that this time for everything is found in the rhythm of the way that we live. It is a matter of maintaining a balance of work and play and family and faith. It requires that we know our priorities, and our egos, and that we make intentional decisions both in the day to day and in the year to year about our time. Seemingly little decisions that we make about our jobs (more success often means greater time demands) or the size of our homes (more space is more to clean and decorate) or the complexity of our hairstyles or even the grocery store that we use, all these big and little decisions have long term impacts upon the amount of time we have for our real priorities.

These are all *chronos* issues, scheduling our priorities, being aware of how the decisions we make about all kinds of things effect our time our. Ecclesiastes speaks to us of chromos time: 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 (and here's the hint at something more than chronos) yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

The second word that is in the Greek for time is a little bit more difficult to understand: the word is *kairos*. Literal translations include: a decisive point ; opportunity; or fullness of time. I have come to think of it as God's time. *Kairos*.

The writer of Ecclesiastes speaks of chromos time and the balance of everything in its time and then says: "Yet they (humankind) cannot find out (in chromos time) what God has done from the beginning to the end.



Jesus said: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

And the word that he uses is *Kairos*. "Why don't you know how to interpret the kairos?" Kairos does not refer to that linear march of time but to the quality of the time itself. I think the best way to think of Kairos is the expression a "pregnant moment" but in God's time every moment is a pregnant moment: pregnant with divine possibility. Every moment is filled with opportunity: the opportunity to experience God. Every moment is a decisive point in which we decide to be in the kingdom or in the world. Every moment carries in it the fullness of time, the fullness of God's love, the fullness of life with God – right there for the experiencing.

Unlike chromos time, living in Kairos time is not a matter of scheduling. It is a matter of awareness. It is a being tuned in to the divine and the divine potential in every moment. And here is the connection between the quality of Kairos time and the scheduling of chromos time: when our chronos time gets out of balance it is difficult to maintain that kairos awareness. Again, it was not only that I was exhausted back in 2001 but I also had lost a sense of God's presence with me, a sense of wonder and awe, a sense of purpose and confidence in what I was doing. It sounds subtle, but it was everything. The moment by moment awareness of kairos time demands a certain spaciousness of our days, a leisureliness of time that makes possible our awareness in this moment.

It is in kairos time that we experience the deep peace and the rich assurance of God present with us, that we can just somehow sense god's will for us (and not our will with God's name stuck on it) ...and it is in Kairos time that we move out of chromos into eternity. Right here on earth.

Think of a pencil, if I take the linear plane of chronos time along its length and turn the pencil to see it from a different angle (the point), that point is eternity. It is a matter of perspective. Because, eternity is not set in the linear plane of chronos time, eternity is set in Kairos time, it is present in each moment. And if we are going to "get it" we have be able to keep our chronos time in balance so that we can live our lives not on that linear pane of chronos but in the vast eternity of Kairos time.

Paul writes: Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time (Kairos time), because the days (chronos time) are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Now I am in some ways a product of the 60's and while I remember the Byrd's musical rendition of the Ecclesiastes text, the fact is that by the mid-1970s I became a fan of the music of John Denver. And my favorite John Denver piece is a song about time. It has within it the poetic mixing of the moving in and out of both chromos and kairos time and it ends with what sounds to me like an invitation from God to us about living in the transcendence of kairos time. But the song begins in chromos time:



Time as I've known it
doesn't take much time to pass by me:
minutes into days turn into months turn into years
they hurry by me.
Still I love to see the sun go down
and the world turn around...

Dreams full of promises,
hopes for the future I've had many,
dreams I can't remember now
hopes that I've forgotten, faded memories

Still I love to see the sun go down
and the world turn around...

And I love to see the morning
as it steals across the sky
I love to remember and I love to wonder why
I hope that I'm around so I can be there when I die,
When I'm gone

And then God whispers:
I hope that you will think of me
in moments when you're happy
and you're smiling,
....that the thought will comfort you
on cold and cloudy days
if you're crying
and that you'll love to see
the sun go down
and the world go around
and around and around.

PRAYER OF APPLICATION

Lord, give us the insight to soar off the linear plane of chronos and into the kairos of your eternity. Amen.

