

STIRRING FAITH

Sermon, October 3, 2010

World Communion Sunday

Texts: Lamentations 1:1-5, 3:19-26; II Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

A familiar lesson I read from Ecclesiastes 3 at just about every funeral, "*To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to harvest ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance, a time to embrace, a time to refrain from embracing, a time to get, and a time to lose ...*" and so on. I always end it with verse 11, which tells us, "*God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men, though they cannot fully fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*"

This has been a sad few weeks in our congregation, losing four dear members in such a brief span of time. Some of you know something of the sense of sadness, even despair, echoed in our reading from Lamentations as the Hebrews are led into captivity and exile; tears are very close to the surface for many of you right now. As I mentioned during Mrs. Fraser's funeral yesterday, I take comfort from knowing this is not a random universe; this loving God, the Creator, has a plan, though we cannot fully fathom (*or understand*) that plan this side of heaven. But because He has set eternity in our hearts, we *know* there's something more. We all instinctively yearn for something more. No matter how people may try to squelch that instinct, it's there in everyone, because God the Creator put it there. The Bible unabashedly affirms there *is* more; there is life beyond the earthly shadow we call death. We are always confronted with life's brevity and frailty, but especially at times like these past few weeks ... even in the longest of lives, such as Mrs. Gorton's almost 103 years of age at her passing, life's brevity is undeniable. Nothing confronts us as creatures more than the watch on our wrist. The future relentlessly comes in at the rate of sixty seconds per minute, sixty minutes per hour, 1,440 minutes per day, and it just doesn't stop. We try in vain to stop it, slow it down, or turn it back, but despite what some of the Madison Avenue advertisements might promise, it is our lot as creatures to be unable to alter, stop or slow down time.

"*To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.*" I think about this when I go to the local CVS near my home. When you're young, you go in the drug store and there is nothing there for you but toothpaste, deodorant, shampoo and candy bars; what else would you ever want? Time moves on and then you become a parent, and you find yourselves time and again going to that heretofore unexplored aisle with the Pampers and the powders and the pacifiers and the rash ointments and formula bottles. Time moves on and a few years later you graduate to the next aisle down, the one stocked with the cherry flavored Triaminic and Robitussin and Barney band aids and that purple Children's Motrin. Then a few years later, as the children get active, you head to that analgesic pain reliever aisle ... as one harried parent put it, "If you have a lot of tension and a headache, just do what it says on the bottle ... take two aspirin and keep away from children!" And eventually we all go in that CVS or that Rite Aid or Walgreens and come to the dawning realization you have put those childish aisles behind you ... I can actually say I sometimes get nostalgic and even a little weepy looking down that diaper aisle as I pass by; being a solo dad of three I spent many hours (*and dollars*) there. That was a time, a season in my life, now gone. But perhaps part of the real reason I'm a little weepy is that I know the aisles I so far have avoided in life, they are now beckoning. Aisles with things I never had to buy before. You go up those aisles, you're embarrassed, you don't want people to see you, you get what you need and sort of saunter to the check-out line with the bright-faced, healthy looking, young, sparkly, bouncy twenty-something at the cash register and mumble, "This is for my neighbor," or "My aunt asked me to get this for her; is this the best brand?" You're actually getting those things old people get. Why is that? Because you ARE old, for goodness sake, because things are beginning to come apart or fall off or fall out, and you're in trouble! The transience of our lives is written into our DNA, and although Death has not reached into our lives and grabbed us yet, let the Grim Reaper rattle his chains as he has this week to get us thinking about these things! Death is the destiny of everyone; let the living take it to heart.

Not only is there a time for every season under heaven, but there will be a *last* time, a last time for every journey. You will put your key in the ignition one last time. You will bid goodbye to your wife, one last time. You will say goodnight to your husband, one last time. You will hug your grandmother/granddaughter one last time, you will kiss your children one last time, you will go to church one last time, you will talk to your parents on the phone one last time, you will have a birthday party with your mother one last time ... all of us will do something for the last time. To deny that is to deny the very essence of our humanity. All die. We don't like it, there is always deep sadness caused by this last enemy to be destroyed, and that is why we mourn. But it is a reality, and it is good to prepare for that final reality while we live. There is a time for every season, and now is the time to do what we can to exercise our faith, to serve while we can, to love others while they are still with us, to invest our energies and our

time and our heart and soul and our money in things that matter, and to make certain in all respects we are ready to meet our Maker. For meet our Maker we will; that is true for every single human being on the planet.

That great theologian ... Ann Landers ... ran a little parable in her column some time ago entitled "YOU CAN BANK ON IT." "Imagine you had a bank that each morning credited your account with \$1,440 -- with one condition: whatever portion of the \$1,440 you failed to use during the day would be erased from your account, and no balance would be carried over. What would you do? You'd draw out every cent every day and use it to your best advantage! Well, you do have such a bank, and its name is TIME. Every morning, this bank credits you with 1,440 minutes. And it writes off as forever lost whatever portion you have failed to invest." God grants us each day 1,444 minutes each day from His bank of time, giving us opportunity to exercise our faith, to grow our faith, to put our faith to work, making investments with that time to reap eternal benefits. It doesn't sound very religious, but I like the way one person put it, "Have a blast while you last!" Make the most of the time you have.

The New Testament readings call to mind an old story from the rationing days of World War II. A man walked into a diner, sat down at the counter and ordered a cup of coffee. The waitress brought the porcelain brown mug and set it before him. "Cream or Sugar?" she asked. "Sugar." he replied. She reached beneath the counter for the precious substance; sugar was rationed at the time. She produced the silver-lidded sugar container and a spoon, and watched as the man poured not one, but two heaping teaspoons of sugar into his cup. Giving the coffee just a slight stir, he then placed the sugar container down on the counter, sipped his coffee, and apparently, it wasn't sweet enough for his tastes. So he reached for the sugar again. The waitress's eyes widened in disbelief as he put not one, not two, but three more heaping teaspoons into the cup. As soon as he put the sugar container down, the waitress snatched it away and returned it beneath the counter for safekeeping. Another slight stir, another sip of his coffee, and the customer was still not satisfied. He asked for the sugar again. With steel in her eyes and indignation in her voice the waitress replied, "Stir up what you've got!"

Stir up what you've got! I believe that is exactly what Jesus said to His distraught disciples in our Gospel reading when they requested, "Lord, increase our faith!" Well, maybe not exactly; I am paraphrasing a little.

Now, we can sympathize with the disciples' request. Jesus has been teaching them some hard things. And what follower of Jesus has not cried out at some time or another, like the father in another parable, "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief."? Jesus responds to the disciples' request by saying. "If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, 'Be uprooted, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." And then, Jesus launched into a discourse on the importance of being an obedient servant. These aren't disjointed teachings. He seems to be saying to His disciples their problem is not their lack of faith; just a tiny bit of faith is needed to work wonders. The problem is their lack of action! If they were doing what they ought to be doing, serving as they ought to be serving, then they would see the results they are seeking. If they would put their faith into action, wonders would result! Jesus implies in so many words it is deadly to sit around twiddling our thumbs asking God to give us more faith so we can do the things we really should be doing anyway. What we *need* is to start with what we have, with doing what we know we ought to be doing, and then watch our faith grow as a result! Faith is a muscle that only grows when exercised. Left alone, it atrophies. In a nutshell, that's Paul's word for a discouraged Timothy: "*Fan into flame* (or, as some translations have it, *rekindle*), *the gift of God that is within you...*"

To be clear, the Bible tells us faith is a gift from God. If we think our faith is something we've somehow earned by our superior intellect (*"We figured it out and received the gospel and those dumb pagans didn't"*), well, we're wrong! That attitude breeds pride and even arrogance. Faith is solely a gift. Romans 12:3: "For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God assigned him." Note: "*The faith which God assigned Him.*" Our faith is a gift from God! As Paul tells Timothy, we have faith not because of anything we have done but because of God's own purpose and grace, and we are called to exercise that faith. Use it, stir it to action, make the most of the time we have while we have it. The central problem in our lives is not our lack of faith, but that we do not put the faith we have into action! Have a blast while you last! Stir up what you've got. Do what God calls you to do. And it is the nature of faith to expand to fit our needs as we exercise it. Again, the problem is not our lack of faith. The problem is our lack of action. As we give feet to our convictions, we will see miracles happen! It doesn't take a lot of faith to get things done, even the tiniest bit will do. What really matters is that we put the faith we have to work.

"Increase our faith," the disciples begged Jesus. Jesus replied, "Increase your service." Increase your service and you will find faith you never knew you had. Stir up what you've got. Use what you have been given in the time you have. Do what you are designed to do. Bloom where you are planted. Be God's person where you are, and you will find your faith not only sufficient for the task, but you will actually find your faith increasing. Regardless of its size or strength, put your God-given faith into action, and miraculous things just might happen.

And besides ... you never know just how much time you have.