

*“How the Church Tells Time”*

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, November 18, 2012

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Holy Scriptures: Leviticus 23: 1-3    Matthew 6: 24-34

Leviticus 23: 1-3

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>2</sup>Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: These are the appointed festivals of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations, my appointed festivals.

<sup>3</sup> Six days shall work be done; but the seventh day is a Sabbath of complete rest, a holy convocation; you shall do no work: it is a Sabbath to the Lord throughout your settlements.

Matthew 6: 24-34

<sup>25</sup> “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup> And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>28</sup> And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup> yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? <sup>31</sup> Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ <sup>32</sup> For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup> But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

34 “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

## **Telling Time**

One day a visitor sat in at the Court of Sessions in England in the morning,

and then returned again later in the afternoon,

only to discover that the same court case was still being tried,

and moreover,

that the same barrister (attorney) was still talking.

The visitor remarked to the eminent Lord Cockburn,

*“Surely he is wasting time.”*

*“Time,”* Lord Cockburn replied. *“Long ago has he exhausted time.*

*Now he is encroaching upon eternity.”*[\[1\]](#)

That story reminds me of the time two pastors were seated behind the pulpit

while their bishop preached a sermon that may have encroached upon eternity.

One pastor whispered to the other, *“What comes next?”*

The second answered in a voice above a whisper

that was overheard by the bishop, *“Wednesday.”*[\[2\]](#)

True story.

As much as we like to say around here that we don't put a clock on the Lord,

that we're not going to be anxious about time or preconceived deadlines

when it comes to Christian worship and fellowship

and being a part of the beloved community,

let's be honest. We do care. About  
time.

We all have our own internal clocks and timekeepers, personal  
expectations and alarms.

It seems as if we are so keyed up about time

and what is due or overdue or what comes next

that we have lost the art of living in the moment,

and have forgotten the joy of experiencing  
God and one another

in the Now.

Perhaps you saw the cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine,

the one depicting an American couple

dashing up the steps of the Louvre in Paris

shouting, "*Where's the Mona Lisa? We're  
double parked!*"

Physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, communally,

it seems as if we are all double parked.

We are in such a hurry!

Schedule is our master, the clock our altar.

We chase after time day after day, and then wonder

where it went.

Maybe one way to approach this spiritual question

– and how we live and cope with time is a spiritual matter –

one way to approach this is to consider how the church tells time.

Let's start with you.

How do you tell time?

The astronomer measures time by light years.

The geologist measures time by vast cycles,

the historian by epics and centuries,

the industrialist by the fiscal year,

the tax accountant by how many days until  
April 15<sup>th</sup>,

the salaried person by the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup>,

the laborer by the weekly paycheck,

the child by the numbers of candles on the  
birthday cake,

the fan by the sports season, the Olympian in spans of four  
years,

and both the prophets in the Bible and students in  
classrooms

measure time alike, bemoaning, “How long,  
O Lord, how long?!”[3]

The way the church of Jesus Christ tells time

offers us all a way to encounter life from a fresh,  
invigorating perspective.

The church tells time relationally and rhythmically.

We'll start with the rhythm of the faith community.

The liturgical calendar has a rhythm all its own.

Our faith journey is not linear,

like a straight line with a beginning and a middle and an  
end.

Rather our faith journey is circular,

for some endings are new beginnings,

and some beginnings start in the middle

and conclude one phase and introduce  
another.

In other words

the spiritual life is circular, like a spiral, moving forward,

coming full cycle,

and yet each day is new and fresh and opportunities  
abound.

This understanding and appreciation

for the ever-changing movement and growth of our lives  
is reflected in the liturgical calendar of the church.

Our liturgy offers people of faith

a way to remember whose we are and from whence we  
have come,

to tell our story to our children, friends and  
neighbors,

and to remind us who we are.

There is a blessed rhythm in our liturgy

that tells the life and times of God's story and our own.

Listen for the rhythm of our liturgy,

and listen for your own part in the liturgy.

Two weeks from today marks the First Sunday of Advent.

Advent inaugurates the church year.

Advent is the season of preparation and expectation, of waiting and hoping.

Advent is followed by Christmas.

Christmas dawns with joy: Jesus Christ is born in Bethlehem and in us!

We celebrate the birth of God, and our own re-birth in Christ.

Epiphany follows, a season of light, of new insights and inspiration.

During Epiphany we remember Jesus' baptism,  
and we recall that we are all ordained to the  
Christian ministry  
through our baptism into Christ.

After Epiphany is Lent.

Lent begins with shadow and ashes,

reminding us that we dust and to dust we shall return.

We enter a period of confession and preparation,  
an intentional journeying with Jesus to  
Jerusalem and the Cross,  
as we humbly prepare for His  
sacrifice.

During Lent we walk with Him, break Bread with Him,  
are ashamed that we have denied Him,  
and sit vigil with Him in the shadow of the  
Cross.

Easter dawns with joy: Jesus Christ is resurrected, and in Him we  
have new life!

We celebrate the power of love over death, and our own  
new life in Christ.

Easter tide follows, a season of giving thanks for life eternal.

New flowers, new hope, new days dawn, and God is  
so good.

Suddenly on the Day of Pentecost we are afire with the Holy  
Spirit!

We celebrate the birth of the Church,

and we rejoice in our own significant part in Christ's  
redeeming grace.

Pentecost follows,

a season of vision, vocation, and visibly embodying the  
ministry of Christ.

Pentecost is the longest season,

fully half the calendar year, and rightfully  
so,

for this is our time for discerning  
God's will

and putting Christian love  
into practice

in the city of God.

This is the church's way of telling time,

a rhythmic movement of grace,

a gift of God for the people of God.

Advent, Christmas, Epiphany,

Lent, Easter, Pentecost.

Preparation, celebration, enlightenment,

preparation, celebration, embodiment.

The church also tells time relationally.

Think about a recent experience in which time stood still,

an experience in which you were so caught up in the  
moment,

in the power and promise of the moment

that you lost track of time and were totally  
in the Now.

That is called Kairos.

Kairos is a relational experience of time.

Chronos is chronological; Kairos is spiritual.

While Chronos is quantitative, Kairos is qualitative in nature.

This is how the church tells time.

The Church of Jesus Christ is alive and well in order to support  
and sustain you

to get caught up in the good works you do,

in your good relationships,

in your good deeds and good words and  
good thoughts

and the Good News that you are and  
share.

When we are caught up in Kairos,

swept away by the Spirit of God

while building positive relationships,

we don't have time or inclination or a desire  
to do violence

or practice greed or abuse or do harm to our self or  
another living soul.

The Church tells time by making time stand still for the grace of God to do its thing.

One day Jesus sent the disciples out, seventy strong,

nervous, excited and eager, to do ministry in his name.

Jesus sent them out ahead of him, telling them to travel in pairs,

to listen and learn and share the Good News with their neighbors.

In a nutshell, Jesus sent the disciples out

from the security of his fold

into the world all around them,

into the communities that he himself was about to visit.

If Jesus was here today in Atlanta he would say,

*“Go on, git, tell your story and listen to other folks stories.*

*Build relationships.*

*Say ‘peace be to this home’!*

*Eat whatever you are served, even if it looks kinda funny.*

*Cure the sick. Give to those who ask of you.*

*If you don't get welcomed, if folks are not hospitable to you,*

*then shake the dust from your feet, and jus' move on."*

Nothing fancy or complicated.

They were instructed to do exactly what they already knew how.

Tell their story.

Listen to other people's stories.

Be present in someone else's life.

Invite someone else to have a relationship with the holy.

Be the presence of the holy in the community.

See that the holy is already present in the community in the lives of other souls.

If you have ever been on the receiving end of an encounter

in which someone really listened to you? Did time stand still? Was God nigh?

In that moment of *Kairos* did you catch a glimpse of *Koinonia*, of community?

Did you change somehow, in some way great or small?

“Aristotle said that, in telling someone the truth,

the trick was to tell them the truth at the right time.

Maybe God knows enough about us not to rush.

Maybe God knows when just the right time is.” (Will Willimon)

Maybe God doesn't double park.

Maybe God knows the right time for us to hear the truth,

the right moment for us to step out on faith,

the right opportunity to break new ground,

the right experience to share with a hungry  
soul,

the right gift to offer in just the right  
way,

in a way that will be received  
and understood.

A man in a nearby congregation had dangerous open heart  
surgery.

He was told by the doctor

he had no more than a 50-50 chance of survival during the  
surgery.

But he did survive.

When his pastor visited him afterwards,

the pastor said, “You did survive after all! Isn’t that wonderful!”

He said, “No, preacher, I did not survive.

I did more than survive; I was born again.

I am not the same person I have been for the past 50 years.

I have been given a second chance and I am going to be different,

better than before.”

His post-operative time

was for him

a time of both judgment and grace. (Will Willimon)

Speaking personally, thanks to the grace of God,

I am not the same person I was ten years ago, last year, or even yesterday.

Life and love and spiritual encounters and experiences

have changed and transformed me in profound ways.

Much of this has had to do with the way the Church tells time.

How about you?

Live and move to the rhythm of the church.

Be open to the transforming power of God's loving judgment and grace

in the context of *Kairos*, God's time.

*All power to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

## EXTRA MATERIAL

The late Will Rogers had these lines engraved on a huge watch

which he presented to David Rubinoff, the consummate violinist:

*The Clock of Life is wound but once,*

*And no [one] has the power*

*To tell just when the hands will stop,*

*At late or early hour.*

*Now is the only time we own;*

*Love, life, toil with a will;*

*Do not wait until tomorrow,*

*For the Clock may then be still.*

We who knew him loved the way Lonnie Smith greeted you.

When asked how he was doing that day he would say,

*“Any day I wake up and greet the morning is a good day.”*

That attitude will take you far in life, and in love, and in life everlasting.

Martin Luther is known to have said, *“If you are not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don’t want to go there.”* They say that in Martin Luther’s class on Genesis, a student asked, “Dr. Luther, since you know so much about the book of Genesis, tell us: what was God doing all the time before God created the world?” As you can well imagine, Martin Luther was not the kind of person to be one-upped by a smart-mouthed seminary student. Luther replied, “What was God doing before God created the world? God was gathering sticks to make a switch to beat people like you who ask such dumb questions!”

What *was* God doing? How do you think God used her time? Was God planning, praying, anticipating, and hoping long before God created the universe, before God created you and me...

A therapist once said that, in therapy, the greatest challenge is to offer help at the right time. “People’s problems must be allowed to ripen,” she explained. “The premature offer of a solution to their problem will not be received. The therapist must be patient, must allow the client to talk and talk, and wait and wait for just the right time.” (Will Willimon)

[1] G. Curtis Jones, 1,000 Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching, Broadman Press, 1986. Page 349.

[2] William Goodin, God Laughs, Too CSS Publishing. 1990. Adapted by JB-C.

[3] Jones, Page 346, adapted by JB-C.