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The First Sunday of Advent

The Reverend Garrett Yates
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church



I want to spend a few moments this morning listening to the language we use about time. The language we use about time is extremely revealing. It reveals whether we are powerful or powerless people. It reveals whether we really believe that God is in control of history. And it reveals what kind of a surprise we will get on Judgement Day.

Let's start with the way we speak about time and what it tells us about power.

If you are powerful, you talk about time as something you can control. The central notion of control in a consumer society is that of a financial transaction. Thus time is translated into being a commodity. Time becomes one of the most valuable things money can buy. Powerful people are defined as those who have many 'demands' on their time. Needless to say, time is always considered a limited commodity, so the language of supply and demand is quickly employed. People who are busy and important are those whose time is always in demand. Listen to the language these people use about time.

They 'buy' time, as if time were something you could order on amazon. They 'spend' time, as if time were some kind of currency of exchange. They 'use' time as if time were some kind of garden implement. Sometimes they 'invest' time, often a great deal of time. 'Don't "lose" precious time' they tell you, but if they like you, they will 'find' time to see you. Every time they look for a new technological innovation, their first question is whether it will 'save' time. It's never clear how they 'spend' the time these gadgets have 'saved'. What you must never do is 'waste' their time. Just to remind you that they are important, and that they are important just to the degree that they can control time, they demonstrate their ability to calibrate time, making some time more important and valuable than others – their time, of course. Hence the expression 'quality' time. All of these idioms for engaging time culminate when the breathless executive reminds the lackadaisical staff that 'time is money'. Now at last it makes sense to talk of saving, wasting, spending, for time is money. And money gets you every commodity

an economy of limited resources has to offer – hence the language of buying and quality.

By contrast there is another group of people. This group would love to be busy and important, but for a variety of reasons they feel that they aren't. Their division from the first group is not so much about wealth or income, or even educational attainment or physical prowess. It is about the fact that they are on the supply side of the time economy. Their time is not in hot demand. It is not in short supply. Because they are not in a hurry, they are considered by the first group to be 'wasting' time. There's no doubt that they are 'losing precious time' in life's rat race. By any standards of measuring time as money or as the commodity money can buy, these people are poor. But the irony is, they have an abundance of what the powerful people seem constantly to be short of – time. Nonetheless they very often see the world as the powerful see it, and thus see their situation as a bad one. They quickly come to see time as an enemy, and frequently use battle-language. Time is 'against' them, or 'presses in on' them; it 'weighs heavy' on their lives. They seem to be failing the 'test' of time. The saddest language is that which speaks of 'killing' time, since those who set out to kill time almost always lose the battle.

And this brings us to Advent when we celebrate two ruptures that occur in time – the first Advent is the coming of Jesus Christ to be born in a manger, as one of us. To share our time. The second Advent is the coming of Jesus Christ at the end of history. That moment when all of time is rolled up like a scroll, and all creation stands before the Holy God. And so the church finds itself living in, inhabiting the meantime, the middle of these two Advents. Curiously enough, as we've seen, it's this meantime that no one seems too happy about. The powerful say "Life's too short." The powerless say, "How long, O Lord, how long?" In both of these, note, a sort of unspoken resentment towards time.

But what if we believed God had given us just the right length of time to do just exactly the things he calls us to do –

and that when that time was up, he would do the rest? Several times in the gospels, as in the gospel for this morning, Jesus predicts that there will be a dramatic climax to the story of the world. At the end of the world, God finally intervenes and brings justice and peace to his whole creation.

We tend to regard talk of the end of the world as a frightening thing. Of course, for those who treat time as a commodity, the end of the world is a frightening thing: what will happen to all that precious time they've 'saved'? But for everybody else, the end of the world is tremendously good news, because it reminds us that God is in control of history - and that even if we keep on getting it wrong, he will finally make all things right.

What Jesus does by showing us the end of the world is to take time out of our hands. He says 'If you're going to treat time as an enemy or as a commodity I'm going to take time away from you. I'll give you back a new time, but you must treat this time differently. Stop taking about time as if it were in short supply. It's not part of the economy in that clumsy way. You must now treat time as a gift and as a friend.'

Time is a gift, because we live in God's time, not our own. We can never 'buy' time, because time can never belong to us. It always still belongs to God. Time is 'on our side'. We can't buy time with God: God doesn't do deals. We must learn to enjoy God's time. Time is the word for the existence that God continues to give us and that we can never own. Do you really believe God will give you all the time to do what he really wants you to do? Does your life reflect that? Or are you constantly trying to squeeze more into the day than the day can hold, seeking to hold back the waters of time through endeavoring to preserve your youthful looks, rushing around proclaiming to the world by your busyness that God is on holiday and you're filling in for him? If time is a gift, time is on your side. Time is not a commodity. It is not in short supply. You may not have all the time you want in your life. But you do have all the time you need.

And time is a friend. Time is a friend because we have

nothing to fear from what God has in store for us. The face we see on the judgement seat will be the face we have seen on the cross and on the day of resurrection. Judgement Day may bring some surprises, but it will bring no shocks. We have seen God's character and it's not going to change. If time is our friend, we can enjoy time with those who do not promise to make the world a better place. We can be with prisoners, with young children, with the very elderly - for that's where God spends her time. If time is a gift, we can enjoy that gift with all sorts of people who don't contribute to our status - with the very sick, with the homeless, with the mentally ill.

If there is one social group who expose the link between our attitude to time and our attitude to God, it is people with severe learning disabilities. As apart of the ordination process, ordinands do a year of Clinical Pastoral Education as a way to put their vocational call under the pressure of, well, experience in a clinical setting. For my CPE, as it is called, I worked at a Group home of 4 young men who lived with Downs' syndrome. From 4-7pm, 3 days a week I'd hang out Joseph, Ryan, Matt, and Danny. One of the things about these four guys is that they moved really slowly. Simple tasks like checking the mail, or putting away a game, or setting the table, or finding what to watch on TV – it just took time. And if I am honest, sometimes my experience with them was just one of boredom. Perhaps what I'll remember most, though, is our experience of meals together.

The meals at their house, called the Emmaus House, weren't great. They often consisted of over-ketchupped meatloaf, or Salisbury steak swimming in gravy, with a side of barely thawed mixed veggies from a bag, and very plain rolls. We drank the same thing every night and that was chocolate milk. We said the same blessing every night, too: thank you for this food, for Mr. Garrett, for these friends. We were all reminded by the house leader to put our napkins in our laps, and before we dug in, the guys would all bump fists – excited to have arrived at dinner time, the best time of day. The meal was full of loud “mmmhhmm’s” and “ahhhh’s” and

an occasional belch here and there. The guys were grateful for whatever was before them; I'd usually grab takeout on the way home.

But reflecting back, it was this year that my anxiety about time – like there is never enough of it – was graciously exposed. What those young men taught me is that there is something more valuable than constant productivity and breathless activity. In loving them, and enjoying our friendship, I learned about God, namely that its not my striving but freely given grace that suffuses my life with meaning. What they were teaching me about was church. A community of people living in a different rhythm of time. Time marked by gratitude; time marked by friendship. They taught me that there is a speed limit on the road to mystery and holiness, and I was almost always breaking it.

Let me close by offering you three ways to practice what I'm talking about. Here's something of an Advent spirituality.

First, remember that the greatest gift you have to give is your time. Who might you bless with your presence, your time? There is someone in each of our lives who is simply asking for our time. They don't need our money, our advice, our opinions, or our coaching. They just need time.

Secondly, where do you feel you are falling short of the life you wanted? Where are you frustrated with your own life, your own habits? Maybe you are stuck in a season of fear or aimlessness or even despondency. Remember, you are not the season of life you are in. Give yourself the gift of time.

Finally, come to church. Church is the place where there isn't anything to gain, to attain. Church doesn't try and accomplish anything. Church just worships God, the giver of life, of time, of Jesus. Church doesn't advance us in our careers. It reminds us we are more than them. I guess according to the world church is a waste of time. We know better.

It's in this company, in the presence of the One who nourishes us with his life, that we are coming to receive our

lives as gifts; and through his spirit we are learning, day by day, week by week, what it means to be friends with time.