

GOD'S GIFT OF TIME

Maybe it's because I'm getting older. As my life careens forward at warp speed in the sixtieth decade of my life, and the reality hits me that, unless there's some kind of amazing scientific breakthrough in the near future, I've got more yesterdays behind me than tomorrows in front of me, I occasionally open my eyes when I wake up in the morning and think, "Wow! I'm still here! I've been given more time. I have another day of life to live. What a nice surprise. What a delightful thing. Thank you, God!"

Time is a gift. A wonderful, God-given gift. The Lord isn't obligated and doesn't owe us any of the time we're given. Not a single minute of our lives is earned or deserved by us. It has simply been given to us, *gratis*, by our Creator. And, no matter what we do, or how much we plead and beg or try to negotiate or bribe God, we can't add even one second more to our lives than God has in mind for us.

Back in college, as an English Literature major, I read a short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald. I don't recall the name of the story, and I don't even remember very much about what the story was about. But there was a scene in that story that has stuck with me for all these forty-odd years. One of the characters was a very, very wealthy man. He had more money than he knew what to do with. But when he grew older he realized that his time was running run out and he was going to die soon.

For most of his life this very rich man was able to buy anything his heart desired, and he used his abundant wealth to get the people around him to do what he said, whether they wanted to or not. No one ever said "no" to him. And he didn't see why that should change now, in the face of death.

So this very wealthy man went into his vault and pulled out his most precious possession: a very, very large and very, very valuable diamond. He took it outside, fell on his knees, and wordlessly let God know he wasn't ready to die yet. He had more living to do, and he wanted more time. He needed more time. But he would make it worth God's while if God gave him what he wanted.

Then the wealthy man picked up his massive, priceless diamond in both hands and held it up to heaven, to let God know, “This can be yours, God. It belongs to me and I can give it to anyone I want. And I will give it to you if you give me more time to live.”

Most people take God’s gift of time for granted. We don’t recognize, or we simply choose to ignore the fact that we’re not given an infinite amount of days to be on this earth. Our mortal life is limited and will, in fact, come to an end one day; and no attempt to bribe God, not even with a massive and incredibly valuable diamond, is able to change that.

On the other hand, Jesus told a parable about a fig tree that, for all intents and purposes, ought to be cut down. It’s time had run out. For the past three years it hadn’t produced any fruit. It was just taking up good soil that could be used to grow another healthy, fruitful tree. What was the point of keeping this barren, worthless tree around?

There was no point. None at all. Which is why the owner of the vineyard where the tree was planted ordered it to be cut down. But the man who took care of the vineyard on the owner’s behalf pleaded with him. “Sir, give this tree more time. Leave it alone for one more year, and I will dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, you will be pleased. But if it continues to be fruitless, then it can be cut down.”

Do you see the amazing grace of God in that parable?

Our time on earth is limited, and one day it will run out. The bottom line is that we’re living on borrowed time—time we’ve borrowed from God and belongs to God; time that God can give or take away as God wills. But in this parable of Jesus, in which the tree represents us and the vineyard owner represents God, God gives us the gift of more time. More time for us to be tended to and fertilized. More time for us to take in all the nutrients in the soil we’ve been planted in. More time for us to produce good fruit for the one who owns the vineyard we’ve been planted in.

Sometimes it seems like we spend a lot of time waiting around for God to do what we believe God can and should do. We see the world in a mess. We see people who are hurting, homeless, suffering and dying. We see how the climate is changing and the weather is more extreme, and how evil is unwavering and sin is constant. And we ask God, “Where are you? Please do something now!”

Yes, there are times when we wait on God to do something for us, and (let’s be honest) God seems to take forever, and we grow impatient. We might call it “Divine Tardiness”—at least that’s our human perception of God’s

seeming absence. But there's another side of the coin to consider, which Jesus' parable this morning points out. Because there are times when God waits on us to do something for Him, to be more fruitful in serving Him and proclaiming the kingdom, and we seem to take forever. So perhaps, every now and then, we might want to ask ourselves, "Is God growing impatient with us?"

You see, at those times when we put off or simply ignore what God is calling us to do, God's tardiness, God's lack of action, isn't a frustration, but a blessing that acts in our favor. Because, by the grace and mercy of God, we're granted a reprieve. We're not "cut down" right away when we're not bearing the amount and quality of fruit God wants us to produce. Instead, we're given more time.

So yes, sometimes God's tardiness is trying and wearisome. We don't understand why God doesn't act right away in the face of evil and injustice and great sin. And we want to shout, "Don't just stand there, Lord; do something!" But when we come to realize that we're not producing the fruit that God expects from us; when we recognize that we ourselves are contributing in some way to the pain, injustice and sins of the world; when we acknowledge that we haven't fully blossomed into what God created us and intends for us to be, the shout becomes, "Don't do something, Lord; just stand there! Be patient with us."

And, according to Jesus' parable of the barren fig tree, God is doing exactly that right now. God is giving us the precious gift of more time. More time for God's caretaker, Jesus, to work on us. More time for us to get our act together. More time to do the ministry and the witnessing God put us on this earth to do. And that's when God's delay, God's tardiness, is a blessing to us. Because it means, in the words of Yogi Berra, that it's not over 'til it's over, and by the grace of God, with Jesus' help, we still have time to bear some fruit.

You know, believers and people of faith like us often think of time in terms of what God can do for us. And if what we consider to be too much time passes without God doing anything, we grow impatient. We become irritated. We get frustrated. But what if God thinks of time in terms of what we can do for Him? Does the Lord get impatient, irritated and frustrated with us as God waits for us to act?

Maybe. But according to Jesus' parable of the barren fig tree, even if that's the case, God still graciously gives us the gift of more time. And thank God for that!

I believe one of the greatest challenges we face in our efforts to love God is simply to allow God to act in God's own good time, and to accept and be patient with God's time table, which is usually different from our time table.

Most of us have faith that, in some way, shape or form, God will ultimately come to us, will heal us, and will save us. The trick is to realize that it's probably not going to be according to our schedule; not at the "right time" as we calculate it, and to accept that the time we think is best for God to act in the world and do something might not be the time God thinks is best to act. The question that raises for us is: will we still praise and love God, even when God seems to be slow to arrive and running behind schedule according to our calendar.

There was a woman of deep and abiding faith who, after she was diagnosed with cancer, prayed twice a day for God to heal her. A year later, as she entered her third grueling round of chemotherapy, she said to her pastor, without a trace of bitterness or self-pity, "Well, it looks like, once again, God isn't on my schedule. I guess the Lord has decided to heal me in some other place, at some other time."

My dear friends, right now, today, we're in the midst of our life's journey. We haven't yet arrived at our destination. Our scheduled time of arrival, to wherever it is God is leading us, has yet to be determined. Sure, we can try to come up with a time table, but chances are it won't be God's time table. The good news is, wherever we're headed to and whatever God is calling us to do, there's still time. We don't know how much time, but as long as there's life and breath in us, then, by the grace of God, and thanks to the pleading of Jesus our Savior, the Lord is giving you and me another opportunity to bear fruit.

But we need to be mindful that the time God has gifted us with isn't limitless, and we must not take it for granted or trick ourselves into thinking it's never going to run out, because eventually, one day, it will. So, let's use the precious time we've been given wisely, while remembering that time is God's gift to us; and what we do with that time is our gift to God. Amen.