

It's about Time: Learning
Hebrews 4: 12-13; Mark 10: 17-30
October 11, 2015
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I. Introduction

Last week Julia and Jeannine and I finished up reading the third Harry Potter book with Joshua. And for those of you that may know that book or movie, you may remember that one of the things that happens throughout the story is that Harry and Ron are confused by how many classes their friend, Hermione, is taking in school. Now Hermione has always been the smartest of the group but she seems to be taking more classes than is possible and some of those classes are happening at the same time. So, they don't know exactly how she's making this all work until the end of the story we find out that Hermione has been given a magical device called a Time-Turner that allows her to go back a certain period in time when she wants to. So she's been able to take a class at 10 o'clock and then run the Time-Turner and go back and take another class at 10 o'clock. And it struck me very powerfully I need one of these, right?

I mean, so much of my life would be easier if I had just a few more hours -- it wouldn't even have to be that many. Two or three or maybe four hours a day and I could get it all done because I'm really close most of the time. But if I had just those extra couple of hours, I could make sure I get those last e-mails finished up and I could practice a little music and I could read a good novel. I could really get it all under control if I just had those couple of extra hours.

This week we're starting off our Stewardship Series and usually when I say that word, what you all think are dollar signs, right? It's about money and there is a piece that is about money, so I don't want those dollar signs to go away entirely. But I thought we might spend a few weeks this fall talking about how we use our time, because stewardship really is about how we use all of the resources that God has given us. In a place like Metropolitan and Washington, D.C. more broadly, it often feels to me as though time is a resource that we all feel short of and much of how we address time also is reflected in how we address our money. So, I thought it might be helpful for us to spend a little time looking at that and the whole series I'm calling, *It's About Time*. We'll get to the money piece, of course, but I'm going to use the lectionary texts as we work through these weeks to explore different elements about how we use our time.

II. Rich Young Ruler

Our Gospel lesson from the lectionary this Sunday is actually one of the classic financial stewardship texts that we often preach from when we're talking about money because it is one of the most challenging passages we have on our finances. It is a powerful story that was a converting story for St. Anthony in the very early years of our church and for St. Francis in the Middle Ages. They heard this story of a rich, young man and Jesus' call that he give up all that he had, and they went and did the same and changed the

world. It is also, I will say, a profoundly uncomfortable passage for us who are more affluent. And I would suggest this is one of the most heavily rationalized stories in the entire scripture. Because most of us don't want to hear Jesus say "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of Heaven." Because you know what, that doesn't bode well for us, and so we try to find ways of getting around it. And I ran across some wonderful and hilarious ones over the years.

Some of you may have heard it said for example that the eye of the needle was a gate in Jerusalem that was very narrow and very hard to get your camels through so you had to take off all of the stuff the camel was carrying and squeeze that camel through the eye of the needle. Guess what? Total fiction. There was never a gate called The Eye of the Needle in the wall of Jerusalem. This was made up to help us get around this passage. You may also have heard that the word for "rope" in Aramaic -- Jesus spoke Aramaic -- that the word for "rope" and the word for "camel" are very similar, they're just off by a single vowel, and so somebody misheard Jesus. What Jesus really said was it's easier to get rope through the eye of the needle than for a rich person to get -- and you know what, that's hard. It's hard to get a rope through the eye of the needle. But if you try, you know, if you squeeze it really, maybe. No. It's harder to get a camel through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into the Kingdom of Heaven. That's hard language.

What I think Jesus wants us to understand, and John Wesley was very clear on this too, is that all of what we have is God's. God has let us use it for a period but it's all God's, and once we start to understand that, we change the way we look at those resources. Jesus is not being hard on this man. He in fact, as you heard just a minute ago in the Gospel, it says, "Jesus looked at this man and he loved him." He knew he was trying hard. This is actually the only place in all of the gospels where the writers tell us Jesus loved somebody. Jesus loved this guy. He wants him to succeed. So, he's not trying to be hard. What he's trying to help the guy understand is you've got to ask the question in a different way.

When John Wesley realized this, it changed his whole life. And the wrong way we ask the question is, how much of my stuff, how much of who I am do I give to God? And what Wesley encouraged us, a good Methodist, to ask is a different question, which is to acknowledge it's all God's stuff so how much of it do I really need? And you all know that John Wesley figured out how much he needed to live on as a very young man and he stuck by that budget for his entire life. He was actually enormously wealthy in terms of what he earned, one of the wealthiest men of his day by the end of his life, but he figured out what he needed to live on, that's what he lived on and everything else he gave away. So, every single year of his life, he was giving more and more away to God and God's work. And he said to his followers, "If I die with more than 10 pounds in my possession, call me a thief." And he didn't. He died with less than 10 pounds because everything that he earned he gave to God's work.

What I don't want this stewardship program to be about is Charlie Parker trying to squeeze a little bit more time and money out of my already stretched life. I'm going to do it so you should get used to that, but I don't want this to be a heavy sort of, "Oh my golly, I've got to figure out how to add one more thing to my schedule." What I would like this to be about is an opportunity for us to think about how we are prioritizing our time and our resources. Because if they're all God's, if we can start to reflect that and use our time and our money as God invites us to use it, all the other pieces fall into place.

We don't get more time, we don't have a Time-Turner, nor do we get more money. This is not a prosperity Gospel that if I give my money to the church, God is going to pour more and more money into my life. That is a heresy. What it is about is that when we put God in the center, when God becomes the obsession, and that starts to be reflected in how we use our time and our money, all the other pieces seem to fall into place and we find the places where we have been frittering our time and our resources away and start to use them better.

So, I want to invite you to have that question in the back of your head through these next few weeks, "If all the time is God's, how does the way I spend that reflect that reality?" trusting that if it does, all of the other pieces fall into place.

III. Learning the Faith

So, we're going to talk a little bit in these last few minutes about one of our five learning pillars or one of our five pillars of our church which, as I told you, were praising, learning, caring, sharing, and serving. And I want to talk for just a minute about a life of learning. And we love learning at Metropolitan, amen? I mean, we are a people who love to absorb information. We love to learn. And learning has been at the heart of much of our life as a community for years. And that's a great gift, because I want to suggest that for most Christians, learning stops somewhere along the time that either they get their third-grade Bibles or they finish confirmation class and they figure, "Okay, I've got all the information that I need now."

Well, dear friends, all of you in your professional lives I suspect have some expectation for continuing education, right? You learned what you needed to get the job and as the job evolves, as our knowledge evolves, you are expected to keep up with that. You've got to keep perfecting your knowledge. And knowledge of God is no different. You learned a lot in Sunday school and that's great, but as you have grown, as our body of knowledge has grown, there is more stuff to process. And what happens interestingly in a lot of churches in our country is that people stop their learning process when they get confirmed. Often they'll drift away from the church in their young adulthood and then they'll come back with the same understanding of our theology, of scripture, of our traditions and history that they had when they were a teenager and it doesn't fit anymore. And they go, "Oh, this church thing doesn't work at all for me. It's not speaking to my needs or who I am." Well, yeah, because you're in a different place than you were in as a teenager. And if you're not taking the time to grow in your

understanding of what the scripture is about, in your understanding of what our history and theology are about, then of course it's not going to fit because you're in a different place now. So, this whole learning pillar for our church is about deepening our understanding of all of these vital pieces of who we are as a community and as a people of God.

Now the other thing I want to highlight is that learning in a Christian context is not simply a matter of accumulating more information. It is not about learning more data necessarily. There is part of that. But accumulating information is not a dissimilar process from accumulating wealth. It becomes a little mindless at some point and it doesn't accomplish what we think it's going to accomplish. So, I want to suggest that in a Christian context education is not as much about information as it is about formation. It's about taking what we learn and having that shape who we are and how we understand what the world and our lives are about. If you learn in a Bible study class that the Babylonian sacked Jerusalem in 587 BC, that's great, that's important information. But what I'd also like you to learn is how in our prayer lives we start to listen and to hear God's voice, how as we engage those words of scripture we allow them to shape us and call us. Because our understanding of what scripture is about is that it is not just a dusty, old book that we absorb information about. It is a living document through which the living Holy Spirit speaks to us.

This is why in this wonderful letter to the Hebrews Paul tells us that the Word of God is living and active. It is working at the very moment that we encounter the words of Scripture and that part of our education is figuring out how to open ourselves up to that. Paul says that that's not going to be a comfortable process often because it's about self-revelation, it's about understanding who we are and who we are in front of God, and that can be very challenging stuff. This is why Paul tells us that the Word of God is sharp as a two-edged sword. It's not just sharp on the one edge, it's sharp on both, which means you can cut going out and you can cut coming back. It's about understanding who God is and understanding who the world is and understanding who we are in the midst of that.

And Paul tells us that this sword is so sharp that it separates bone from sinew and that's an uncomfortable image, right? That's hard work. And so, what Paul wants us to understand is this is not for the faint of heart. It is the source of life, it is a source of joy, but it is not a process to be engaged in casually. It's not just ticking off a few bits of information that I can gather now and impress my friends at dinner with. This is about understanding who we are at our core and who God is and how those two connect.

Christian education is about being formed into the image of God so that we are not simply learning things, we are becoming different people and engaging the world in different ways. We have got a whole host of those places in the life of our church, and that wonderful brochure that I held up at the beginning of the service has all of those listed. So, take a look at that and figure out where the places that I can take advantage of this opportunity, where are the places that maybe I want to teach and learn through that process.

We're going to be looking at all of the different pillars over the next several weeks and what I don't want you to do is assume I've got to do each of these and figure out an area where I'm participating in each of these every single week. That's going to be overwhelming. What I want you to be doing is listening for where the Holy Spirit may be leading you to plug in, to serve, to help lead worship, to care for those who are most vulnerable. But this learning piece is one of the places that we get fed, the place that we can deepen our journey and our walk and start to more and more become who God has called us to be.

IV. Conclusion

At the end of the third Harry Potter book, Hermione actually turns in her Time Turner to Professor McGonagall, and when Ron is surprised at that and says, "What made you do that?" she says, "It was driving me mad and I needed to get back to a normal schedule." Trying to fit more and more and more stuff into a finite amount of time is a recipe for being driven mad and I'm not trying to do that to you. What I'm inviting you to do is to listen for where the Holy Spirit may be calling you to use your time in some different ways and in ways that reflect who you are as a sacred child of God and as God's hands and feet in a broken world. And when those start to become the priority, a lot of the other stuff starts to sort itself out.

Amen.