

September 10, 2017
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

"DO YOU KNOW THE TIME?"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Romans 13:8-14 ~ Matthew 18:15-20

Old things fascinate me. I even get a kick out of going to stores and finding things for sale labeled as antique that were integral parts of my childhood. Things like carpet sweepers and Scotch coolers are fetching a pretty price ... not to mention my trusty Dale Evans and Roy Rogers chuckwagon lunch box. It's comforting to know that these things are still around. And the older I get, the more I enjoy seeing things *much* older than I. We have a piece of pre-Columbian pottery that is said to be over one thousand years old from the post classic period dominated by the Toltec civilization, who also carved massive, block-like sculptures like those used as free-standing columns at Tula, Mexico.

At the American Museum of Natural History in New York they recreated a scene discovered on the dry plain of northern Tanzania, where Mary Leakey found a ninety-foot trail of hominid footprints. Three barefoot people ... a short man and woman and a child ... walked close together on newly fallen, moist volcanic ash about 3.6 million years ago. (Don't tell those folks at the Creation Museum!) Who knows where they were going, but the trail shows that the woman paused and turned to her left briefly before continuing. "*A remote ancestor,*" Leakey wrote, "*experienced a moment of doubt.*" What could be more human? They also have a "Hall of the Planet Earth" at the museum which displays sulfur rocks that had been formed at a volcano within the last couple of years. I'm not quite sure how I feel about being older than rocks. But they also have some of the oldest rocks that have been discovered on planet earth, some four and a half billion years old.

Where does the time go? Just yesterday I was taking my toddler daughter to swimming lessons and now my granddaughter is learning to swim. Just yesterday I was making plans to retire in Texas, and now I've spent eleven years as a pastor in Wisconsin. Just yesterday ... just yesterday. Time flies, doesn't it? They say it does when you're having fun ... but when you're sitting on a hard pew listening to a sermon, time can really crawl. Why is that? It's all a matter of perspective, of course. And it's not just a matter of interest, but of age as well. When you're young and think you have forever, your time consciousness is about ten minutes. But when you're old, and your days are numbered, your time consciousness expands. History and future ... culture and continuity are what matter. You seek your place ... less in the space of your peers ... than in the span of your generations ... and your own unique contribution matters more than following the latest fads. As the T-shirt says, "Old age comes at a bad time."

The short-term view and the long-term view don't always harmonize, as any parent can tell you. Short term spends ... long term invests. Short term acts ... long term waits. Short term moves ... long term plans. But which of these is the *Christian* view of time? Should I preach urgency

or patience today? Should we put our money into feeding the people who are hungry now ... or into repairing the leaks in the building where we hope to feed the hungry fifty years from now? Churches live with these tensions all the time and so do people. What should we do with the time we have?

"You know what time it is!" the Apostle Paul warned the Christians at Rome. "It's time to wake up! The night is gone; the day is near, salvation is at hand." Paul was steeped in the apocalyptic urgency of his day. He was a short-term thinker. Like most other Christians, he believed that Jesus would return at any moment and begin the final judgement. There was no time to waste with frivolous living or silly squabbles. For Paul, the *only* moment is now ... and *now is* the time to get ready to meet your God. After two thousand years, we are still preaching this.

Ironically, our culture has caught on, though for other reasons. Many people live now as if there were no tomorrow. Grab the gusto. Seize the day. The future will take care of itself. People don't save like their parents did for what they want. They charge it, and figure out how they'll pay for it later. If making a killing ruins the environment, a company will grab its profits ... leaving the mess for someone else. Businesses used to make five-year plans. With the pace of the economy and the rate of technological change today, five years is an eternity. We are living in the fast lane, but who stops to ask where are we going in such a hurry?

What do we make of this shortsighted urgency in our day ... whether it be secular or religious? Every generation considers itself the most important, and what better way than to consider yourself the last? The world ends when we're gone ... and who would want it to go on since it's the worst that ever was? Here's a quote for you ... "We have fallen on evil times and the world has grown very wicked. Governments are corrupt and even children are no longer respectful to their parents." Would it surprise you to find out that this is not a quote from a modern-day politician who is running for election? Nor does it come from a preacher on a Christian radio broadcast. No, that quote is taken from a clay tablet which is kept in a Turkish museum ... a clay tablet which is more than 4,000 years old.

Prophets, priests and sages of all religions have complained about the moral decay and rampant evil of their day ... surely the worst ever ... and how much more can heaven take before it all ends? Three centuries after Paul, Augustine said, "*Those were the last days then, how much more so now!*" What's more, each generation ... especially our own ... has thought itself crucial and unique.

Is it the arrogance of our generation ... or the shrinking of our perspective ... that puts so many people in a panic about time these days? Don't you remember the hubbub of Y2K? It was a secular apocalyptic of sorts, and we bounced back and forth between thinking it would just be a minor inconvenience ... or it would be a major end to life as we knew it. The year 2,000 was symbolic for a lot of religious people, too. They were thinking that maybe it would be a nice round number for the second coming to finally happen. The government of Israel had to throw out some Christians who were planning to start Armageddon sometime around the new year, just to push things along. Never mind that Jesus and his Jewish people followed a lunar and not a solar year. Never mind that the guy who originally set the Gregorian calendar that we follow misjudged the birth of Christ by four or five years so that it had already been over 2,000 of our

years since Jesus was born. Never mind that the Bible has absolutely no predictions connected with the year 2,000. Come December 31, there were still some people pressing their ascension robes and standing on the rooftops lookin' for the Lord.

I can remember jumping under my desk during drills in elementary school to prepare for nuclear attack. It was the Cuban missile crisis, and Texas was within range. I suppose those desks were much stronger than they looked! My generation grew up thinking the world would inevitably end with a nuclear winter. No wonder we don't save! Until *very* recently, the nuclear threat had subsided for the most part. Let's continue to pray for that apple headed crackpot in North Korea, but let's not scramble under our desks. What if humanity *does* have a long-term future? What if we aren't the last generation at least by several thousand? How do we make long-term thinking automatic and common instead of difficult and rare? How do we make the taking of long-term responsibility inevitable? What if we began to think in 10,000-year blocks of time? Does your calendar go that far? Most of us can't conceive of a world that stretches very far beyond our own lives.

"You know what time it is!" Paul warns us. But do we? If we can't hear Paul's urgency in a cosmic sense, surely we can understand it on a personal level. We can't guarantee we will be here tomorrow. Now is the only moment in which we can do anything to heal past hurts or shape the future. In his urgency about time, Paul didn't come to the same conclusions that our short-sighted generation has made. Our culture says time is short so live greedily as if there's no tomorrow. Paul says now is the time to prepare for eternal life. Our culture says time is short, so don't worry about the consequences of your actions. Paul said time is short and soon you will give God an account for what you did with your time. Our culture says time is short so take care of yourself. Paul said our time is short, so it's all the more important that we love one another ... that it's crucial that we live unselfishly and share what we have ... that it's essential that we not throw away the few hours God has given us on uselessness. Paul instructs us that life is fragile ... any moment any one of us might suddenly be meeting God face to face, and that now is the only time you have to prepare for it. You can't guarantee you'll have another opportunity later. Paul was giving good advice.

But the Bible also has another view of time, not so urgent, not so goal-oriented, not so self-important that we should think God's whole project depends on us. It is the concept of Sabbath. Instead of "Drive `til you drop," Sabbath says "Pace yourself." Instead of "Seize the day," Sabbath says, "Savor the day." Instead of showing how important you are, Sabbath says that taking your time shows how wise you are. Jesus said God made the Sabbath for us. It's God's gift. It is also God's command because God did not create us to be workaholics. You don't even get to the second chapter of the Bible before you learn that Sabbath is built into creation ... one of the ways we are made in the image of God ... as essential to our being as eating or breathing. Sabbath is a time for reflection. Sabbath is a time for rest. Sabbath is a time for re-creation. Sabbath is a time for play. Sabbath is our calling to humility, to serve God by letting the world revolve without us once in a while ... so that we remember that God is in charge of the world and we are not. Sabbath is a time for worship ... which we so deeply need.

Sabbath seems to be a lost art among Christians these days. In generations not long past, you didn't go the movies, you didn't mow your lawn, and you certainly didn't go to the office on the

Lord's day. Now I'm not in favor of setting harsh restrictions, but have we thrown out the baby with the bath water? When do we stop and let our bodies and our fields and our computers rest? When do we take our time with our children and our parents and our senior adults and our friends? When do we obey the command to "Be still and know that I am God?" The Desert Mystics speak of "wasting time with God." That's good advice, too.

Just last Monday we celebrated Labor Day. But the Sabbath is always "labor day" ... a day to be grateful for those who labor in our behalf. In ancient Israel, they were commanded to let their families and their servants and their laborers and their animals and even the strangers among them take their Sabbath, too. In our proud society of "self-made individuals" we easily forget our interdependency. The prosperity of our nation has been built on the backs ... and with the hands of people whose labor is long and hard ... and whose reward is often slim. Racial minorities, immigrants, and the poor have especially provided low cost labor from the earliest days of our nation until now. As a nation, we owe them more than just a debt of gratitude ... we owe them respect, dignity, equality, affordable housing, and affordable healthcare. Without their labor, the rest of us would have much less leisure time and pay much higher prices for scarce goods. Gratitude and community are an important part of the biblical Sabbath ... the day when God rested from the labors of creation ... and when we pause from our own busy schedules long enough to thank God ... and recognize that others are laboring as hard as we ... or harder.

We need to be urgent about some things ... about the violence and racism and poverty and hatred which threaten the future of our children. We need to be urgent about caring for *all* children. We need to be urgent about caring for our planet. We need to be urgent about caring for our own souls and connecting with the eternal God. Your spiritual health is not something to postpone. But we also need to be patient. To take the long view and act now with the future in mind. You see, the Bible is not just about urgency ... it's about patience as well. Why didn't Paul say *that* to the Romans, instead of encouraging this neurotic fear of wasted time? Because it was a given, I think. Paul was an observant Jew. You can bet that whenever the Sabbath rolled around, he stopped in his tracks and rested. On the first day of the week, he gathered with the church to rejoice and pray and laugh and play, because this is holy work, too. On the Lord's day we take a time out. We step into eternity. We get perspective. We realize as surely as we are indebted to those who have gone before us ... we are also responsible for the generations to follow. What we do with our *now* will have tremendous impact for good or for evil in their *future*.

Let us labor this Sabbath in a time for reflection. This is the still place ... in the presence of God ... in the eternal moment ... when you can take your time ... get your life in perspective ... decide what you need to do, both now and in the future. Paul says: "You know what time it is!" Do you know the time? The time is now.

May we pray?

Eternal God, thank you for the span of days you have allotted to each of us and for the people whose labors have made our lives good. Help us to make the most of each moment we have, not in frantic, neurotic, self-important busy-ness, but in training our souls for eternity, building loving relationships, and investing in the future. Lord, help us be responsible with our time, and to enjoy it as you intended, for Jesus' sake. Amen.