

The Better Part

Have any of you ever marveled at what God can do when you give him the time? God can turn a casual acquaintance into a mentor, a chance encounter into a wife, a tiny seed into a watermelon and a few snowflakes into a beautiful, winter wonderland. And did anyone even get the irony in my question? When *you* give *God* the time?

Someone asked me once what the greatest gift that I had ever received is and without skipping a beat, I said my children. Of course, that was BEFORE I had grandchildren. But in truth, the greatest gift that all of us have been given, with the exception of the incredible gift of salvation, is the gift of time. As I was planning the sermons for this season of prayer that we have just been through as a church, the Holy Spirit brought this verse from Psalm 90 to my heart. And I thought it was a wonderful way to remember God's gifts to us as we present our gifts to God. "So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart."

If you were here last week, you watched me pull things out of a gift box that were supposed to help us understand God's will for us. I talked about using our mouths to speak words that God would choose. About using our feet to spread the love of God's care for those who need it most. About using our wallets to share our resources with God's kingdom on earth.

But quite honestly, the hardest part of following God's will *FOR ME* is to give God the time that God deserves. Not studying or working for God in His church but simply BEING a child of God in God's presence and God's glorious creation! Time to be and to be God's child. Time to treasure this life in all of its mystery and joy and pain and pleasure. Time to be loved by

God and by one another and, if we are really numbering our days in the right way, time to even love ourselves.

But as I thought about my time and how I spend it, it seems as if I am always hurrying from one project to the next. From hospital room to meeting. With a deadline for getting the bulletin done, for sending out the weekly eblast, for choosing the hymns, for writing a note to a visitor, for taking Communion to this beloved member, for training new elders! And this is just in my professional life! I wonder if God ever looks down on the earth and sees us as ants, scurrying about, frantically doing, doing, doing. And literally wasting time – our most precious commodity.

Then I thought about Jesus. And it occurred to me that Jesus was never in a hurry. Jesus gave his fullest attention to each person, each situation, each prayer, every joy and sadness that came into his path. I ran this by a friend of who is a colleague in ministry. And you want to hear how God used time with us? We first became acquainted because I was assigned to be her mentor from the Presbytery while she was in Seminary. However, over time, God has grown our relationship into a cherished gift of mutual respect and friendship and we often find sanctuary in each other. A gift of time.

So I asked her, "Allyson, have you ever noticed that Jesus was never in a hurry?" And she didn't say "DUH", but I kind of heard her thinking it. She said instead, "Of course. A good leader always walks slowly through a crowd." WOW! She shared how each Sunday she walks intentionally through the sanctuary, speaking to her members and letting them know how glad she is to have them. Making time for each person, and by doing so, using God's precious gift to the fullest.

Teach us to number our days that we may gain a wise heart. That is also the lesson that Jesus was teaching Martha in our New Testament reading this morning. What we learn from Jesus and Mary is that the best way to know Jesus is through listening to him. This may seem so obvious, yet in our world of busyness, it is often the HARDEST thing for us to do. But the truth is that the best way to number our days and gain a wise heart is to LISTEN.

How can we do that amidst the demands of children, spouses, church, cell phones, ipads, business appointments, homework, carpool lines and soccer games? Well, Luke says that Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened.” In Greek, the passage actually says that she sat in a way that expressed “humility and reception of discipleship.” And as I have told you before, disciple in Greek simply means learner. I take this to mean that Mary soaked up his teaching, took his promises to heart, and listened to every change of inflection in his voice that would yield more clues about him. In other words, she listened in a way that made Jesus her absolute, number one priority.

Yet, in our microwave, FedEx, “Google it” society, I wonder if we are so busy making time our enemy that we don’t realize that we can make it our friend and simply treasure it! You see when we number our days in the way that the Psalmist suggests, we are like Mary, putting our priorities in order. Clearly, Mary’s primary concern is Jesus Christ. And friends, we have the opportunity to sit at the feet of Christ and humble ourselves as his disciples every day through prayer, by being in the word, by listening to other disciples. Yet I wonder how often we are distracted by many things.

Now by my own admission, I know how difficult this can be. It is the struggle that we all wrestle with - between being a Mary and being a Martha! And yes, there are male versions of Martha and Mary too. And please don’t misunderstand me - I am NOT implying that Martha’s

work was unimportant or unnecessary. Where would we be without the Martha's of the world who take care of all the details in every project! And who do it so well!!! But Jesus affirms Mary's choice that day, her priority, to listen rather than get caught up in the flurry of meal preparation that preoccupied Martha. Because it is ESSENTIAL in our quest to know God to listen to Him. To know when to serve and when to just be. Jesus told Mary that she had chosen the better part and so can we.

Another way that we might number our days is by letting others know how much we cherish them. Because once time is gone we can never recover it. One of the privileges of serving as Chaplain at Presbyterian Community was getting to know retired ministers who lived there. They were a wealth of knowledge from both a personal and a professional standpoint. One was the Rev. Dr. Jack Stevenson. Jack became a good friend and confidante and served as a pastor to me when I needed one. I was humbled to sing at his wife's memorial service this past April.

Several weeks ago, Jack called the church. I had heard that he was quite ill and had been put on hospice but, trying to keep clear boundaries after leaving The Home, I had not called him. He began the conversation by using his pet name for me. "Julie girl", he said, "I reckon I'm in my last days and I just wanted to call and thank you for all that you have done for me over the years." He then went on to compliment – in detail - not only every aspect of my ministry, but to talk about the value of our friendship.

While I was away at Columbia Seminary week before last, I got the call that Jack had died. And friends, I will cherish that phone call forever. Jack not only treasured his time with me but actually took the time to tell me. He invested his time in me by serving as a coach and a mentor and then invested even more time when he spent some of his last days thinking about

what our friendship meant to him. And it made me wonder if this Psalm calls each of us to send that note, make that call, right that wrong, thank people for the things that have made us who we are. And we don't have to wait until we think we are dying. The Psalmist is saying that when we number our days, our wisdom teaches us not to end a day with any regrets of things we wish we had said or done. Because tomorrow is an uncertainty for every one here.

Learning to number our days, to have the better part of Jesus, as he said to Mary, not only involves setting our priorities and treasuring each other but it also means sharing the gift of time with God's children in need. Yes, it is very important for us all to make our financial commitment to God a priority, but God doesn't want us to simply write the check and go about our lives. Martha could have easily done that as she hustled from fig tray to water pitcher. Jesus wanted her to give of herself, as Mary was doing.

One of my favorite stories is about the little girl whose mother sent her to a neighbor's house to borrow something. She was gone much longer than her mother expected and she began to worry that she was lost or hurt. The minutes stretched on forever until finally the little girl walked in and her mother immediately began to admonish her. "Where were you? Why were you gone so long? I was worried about you!" The little girl replied calmly that she had stopped to help her friend Susie, whose favorite doll had broken.

Her mother was still a little rattled after her time of worry and retorted quickly, "How could you possibly help her? You don't know a thing about fixing broken dolls!" To which her daughter answered, "I know, but I stopped to help her cry!" This little girl understood the better part. And her compassion reminds us that to hold the hand of a dying parent, to be late for an appointment because someone is sharing their joy with you, to send a text to your son who works in another town just to say, "I love you" is never wasted time.

In the same way, numbering our days means that rather than just collect food for the Carpenter's Table we are called to volunteer there too. That not only do the victims of Hurricane Matthew need our money, but they may well need our hands, our hammers, our buckets and our hugs. That the children of Thornwell will certainly benefit from the special gift that you place in the offering plate but that the visits on their birthdays or inviting them to participate in something WITH OUR YOUTH would be even more valuable.

Friends, this Psalm tells us that what really matters on this planet, for every one of us here, is not our responsibilities, our wealth, our poverty, our skills. Rather it is the number of days we have and what we do with those days. God gave us all of himself, with the gift of salvation through the life, death and resurrection of his only Son. God has given us the better part. How can we give anything less? In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.