

Time for God

Hebrews 13: 1 - 8, 15 - 16; Luke 12: 49 - 56

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This is the second week that we are exploring the rather neglected book of Hebrews, and this week's passage shows why it is so neglected: we get to the really preachy parts. But I am going to suggest that, like a lot of scripture, it takes some deeper digging to see gems beneath the surface. Today's passage is a good example of that. Let's start with a question:

How many of us have enjoyed some experience at some point in our lives, and, reflecting on it quickly, thought to ourselves, "Now I know that God loves me." I think it is easy for us to forget how many ways God tells us that we are precious, special, unique, and valuable. Sometimes it is through the beauty of a sunrise, or the fragrance of a flower. Sometimes it comes to us in the simple smile of someone who loves us dearly, and takes just that special moment to tell us when we happen to need it especially badly. Sometimes it is in realizing that someone, like an angel sent from God, has saved us from some serious harm.

But no matter how it comes, somehow we know that these events are God's way of saying, "I love you. I value you. Your life and how it is lived matters to me." We tend to know those moments because weí well, those of us smart enough to gather here each weekí have made sure to include some time for God in our lives, time to reflect, and time to appreciate. The time we have given to God has helped us recognize when and how God tells us about this special and wonderful love. Time is a precious commodity, of course, but time for God is the most precious of all because it is that time that helps us understand, appreciate, and use all the other times in faithful and fruitful ways. To go outside of our own religion for a bit, that is exactly the point of the Jewish experience of Sabbath, or the recently concluded fasting practices of Muslims during Ramadan: their religions in their orthodox forms mandate a time for God. We Christians have to make more of a decision about it. So let's examine a couple situations and people to illustrate the power of taking some time out for God.

Given that we are in New England, this question may get a lot of "yeses." How many of us have gone on a whale watch? Years ago, when my children were younger, I went on a whale watch with them, out of Salem harbor in Massachusetts, and given that I grew up in the Midwest, I noticed a few things as we traveled out to where the whales are. As you head out of the nice harbor there you go past several islands, each of which seems to have its own lighthouse. Lighthouses were put there to help guide the whaling ships safely into the harbor. I noticed them, because there aren't very many lighthouses in the cornfields of the Midwest. We don't need them there.

But here in Salem harbor? Time was when a lighthouse was the only warning a ship and its crew had of impending danger. It was incredibly important that those lighthouses sent out some kind of signal in all kinds of weather, to let sailors know where the dangers were, because ignorance or errors could lead easily to destruction and death. It was important that their beacons were lit every single night; and it was vital that the lighthouses, themselves, were built solidly in order to withstand a lot of abuse. Because they were dependable, ships could count on them, and they needed to, because danger was everywhere.

I liken the image of the dependable, stalwart, life-saving beacon of the lighthouse to what the writer of Hebrews assures us in his book: that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." How many things in our day and age are that dependable? Not many. Just like the lighthouse beacon directing us towards safety, guiding us to where we need to go, our faith reminds us that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever," and is, therefore, just as dependable a guide today as the lighthouses were a hundred years ago. And just as important.

That is important for us because the corollary is so also true: Jesus Christ may be the same yesterday, today, and forever, but we most certainly are not. We are as changeable as the weather, and we can be blown off course as quickly as the next trendy fad; we often forget much about our yesterdays and we have very few assurances about our personal tomorrows. We can make mistakes, and sometimes, mistakes can find us. We are vulnerable, in short. We need a guide now and again to show us the safe way on our life's journeys. If Jesus Christ is the fixed point for us, the place from which we gain our bearings and sense of direction, that is necessary because it is so easy for us to move or be moved in dangerous directions.

A lost soul named Wayne Roberson was an example of that. He died a particularly senseless death a few years ago. He was not the kind of person -- at least at the end -- that most of us meet, but I had run into him a few times at a homeless shelter in Manchester. Here's how he died: he had let a simple cut on his foot get infected, and he didn't seek help, and he didn't listen to anyone telling him to go to the hospital, and eventually it killed him.

He was certainly not capable of taking care of himself -- his death proved that about as conclusively as you can get -- but what is most compelling about his situation is that up until a few years before that, he was as sane and capable as any of us. He made a few slip ups here and there, got too involved with alcohol and couldn't shake it. His alcoholism led to him having an accident that made his judgment even worse than it already was.

In other words, this tragedy started with just a few wrong things here and there, but they spiraled downward, all the way to his really senseless death. As Christians with loving hearts, we're immensely saddened by his story, especially because we really do try to help people like him -- nice people, but seriously lost people. But the deeper point for those of us here today is: there, but for the grace and direction of God, could be any one of us. If you have ever served a meal in a homeless shelter, you might, too, have had that sensation of wondering how similar many of us, and many of our friends, are to the people we serve. It is an eerie feeling.

So, if Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever for us, then that is God's great beacon for us for our lives: with Christ as our guide, as our beacon, we do have tools that enable us to avoid squandering our opportunities, misusing our time, misdirecting our lives, or falling into the dangerous places from which we will not emerge unscathed. We have the tools, of course, if we take the time to consider them, to honor them, to understand and accept them. In short, if we take the time for God in our lives.

I note, by the way, that the tools are not really all the preachy rules that we read in Hebrews today. Jesus makes it clear that rules aren't really rules unless you can find the love behind them. Once Jesus put the question to the Pharisees, who sought to catch him breaking the rules: "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?" So, clearly, if the rule doesn't serve the love of God, then we must surely be

misusing and misunderstanding the rule -- so demonstrates our Lord, the lighthouse of our lives.

That is why it is so important to hold on to those times and those incidents when God's love and appreciation for us was clear. And, it is so equally important for us to take the time to remember, to consider, to re-engage in our decision to follow the lighthouse that is Jesus in our lives. We do not have to follow rigidly, just like it doesn't usually matter if we go around the lighthouse island by 500 feet or by five miles. What matters is that we take the time, remember the love, and set a course that heads in safe and secure directions.

And, I hope, we then also do our part to help others find that love and safety, as well. That isn't always as easy.

It is too late, unfortunately, for Wayne Roberson. But it is not too late for us, or for our friends, or for many, many other people around us. So, take the time for God, and invite others to do so, too. The lighthouse beacon is there for us, the same today, yesterday, and always.
Amen.

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