

Matthew 25: 1-13

Stress Relief: The Gift of Time

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©Rev. Dr. Susan E. Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

This month our sermon theme will be Stewardship. Now a steward is a caretaker who oversees a club, resort or the household affairs of a large estate. If you are a fan of Downton Abbey then you will recognize that Mr. Carson was the steward of the estate - overseeing all the arrangements for Lord and Lady Grantham. But you don't have to be the Earl of Grantham to know how much you need a good steward. There would be chaos on every airplane without stewards to organize the stowing of the luggage, for example. No modern business could function without stewards who manage every division or department. Corporate vice presidents act as stewards for the president and the Board overseeing the company's business in Europe or the Far East. In the best of all worlds investment firms would consider themselves to be stewards of your pension fund and your stock portfolio. Next Tuesday we will go to the poll to elect people who will serve as our public servants, and the stewards of the Commonwealth.

Not only do we need good stewards to manage some of our affairs, for the common good, God needs good stewards, too. God cannot do it all, so God needs help. We all serve as God's stewards when we manage the lives of our families and oversee the nurture and progress of the children God has given to our care. From the time of creation God has given men and women the stewardship of the earth, a humbling assignment these days. God also needs us to be stewards of the faith that has been

handed down in the Bible. God counts on us to be stewards of God's wisdom and the stewards of Christ's genius.

Being stewards of all life is a very tall order, so during November I will try to break it down into some manageable topics. Today I want to talk about the stewardship of time. One of the most precious commodities we have is time. Most of us were made particularly aware of time on this weekend. Many of us really look forward to this weekend, because it is the one time all year when we gain the wind-fall of one whole extra hour. Through the miracle of calendar re-arrangement we get the gift of time. What does our faith teach us about how to be stewards of our time?

In the first place Jesus says we need to pay attention to time. Today we read the story of the wise and foolish maidens. They were all waiting for the bridegroom to arrive for a wedding feast. The wise ones used their time wisely, and the foolish ones ran out of time and lost out on the banquet. The foolish maidens did not bring enough oil for their lamps so they had to run to the market to buy more oil, but while they were gone the wedding began and the family locked the doors. No matter how hard they banged no one let them in.

Now this is not a very nice story. We all know that people can come late to a wedding; they do it all the time. It is embarrassing, but no one locks them out. So what is Jesus saying here? Why is the story so hard on these poor women? They are not thieves. They have not really hurt anyone. Their big crime is being dis-organized. Their

big mistake is failing to plan ahead. Their flaw is that they tried to do too much. So what is the point of this story? What is Jesus saying here?

Jesus tells his disciples and all of us that no one can fit everything in. Life is finite. There are constraints. You may stretch yourself and your schedule, but in the end there is only so much you can do in 24 hours. So you will have to choose, and some of your choices will be hard ones. With every wave of new technology we test this truth again. We get so dazzled with our ability to do more in less time that we forget what the Bible is saying about limits. Most modern Americans are doing so much that we get intoxicated with the speed of life. When we drive in the car we make a list of people to call, so we put on a headpiece and get work done while we drive. We don't like to think about the research that shows that cell phone users are almost as distracted as those who drink and drive. We spend time on e-mail because it is so efficient and fast. We plan meals that are easy, or grab food on the run, or skip them entirely. We wonder why we are irritable or have trouble sleeping. We are creating a culture of people who are overloaded, overstimulated, jumpy and tense all the time.

Clay Shirky is the leading authority on social media and the impact of the internet on the economy and how it is changing our world. Shirky has done a whole roster of TED talks and is one of our foremost experts on social media. But when he teaches his classes at New York University where he serves as a professor of Theory and Practice of Social media, Professor Shirky does not allow his students to use any electronic devices in his classes. No laptops, cell phones or electronic pads. Why? Shirky has done the research and he knows that the human capacity to concentrate is limited. It is not just

that his lectures cannot compete with the social media that many students flip to throughout class but studies have shown that multitasking is bad for the kind of work required in a classroom. Social media has a negative effect on memory and recall. One study showed that students who multi-tasked in class scored lower than those who didn't. {"Lids Down" *Christian Century* October 29,2014 p. 9} There is a growing body of evidence that shows that the way we use social media constantly is eroding our powers of concentration.

Jesus says there are limits in life. We can push at them like the foolish maidens. We can ask for allowances, but there comes a time when the doors close. While it seems pretty arbitrary that the banquet was closed to these maidens, I think Jesus tells the story for our benefit today. He is describing a truth we all know well.

If you push your children too hard- they will get irritable; you will too. If you plan four after-school activities instead of two a week you will spend a lot of time eating meals in your car. If you over schedule your lives you will spend all your time making sure everyone is on track. If you push yourself too hard you will get sick. I think Christ's message is as powerful today as it was 2000 years ago.

Life involves choices, and they are not easy choices.

Secondly, the Bible says that a balanced life will make you happy.

Listen to the writer of Ecclesiastes - For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to

pluck up what is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal. A time to break down and a time to build up.; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance. I confess this passage makes me anxious because it is so repetitive and it forces me to slow down to read it.

Jesus only lived for about 33 years, and he may not have had more than 3 years in active ministry. It was not very long, certainly when you consider that he became the most famous man who ever lived and his life changed the world completely. In three short years he made a bigger impact than anyone else in history. But Jesus was not rushed or pressured. He maintained a sense of balance.

When he finished a big speech he would acknowledge how tired he was and take a ride in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. After he multiplied the loaves and fish the next day he retreated to a lonely place to rest up. [Mark 1:21-34](#) takes us through a busy day in Jesus' schedule. Jesus and his disciples started out in Capernaum where he spoke in the synagogue. People were so impressed with his teaching that a man who was deranged appeared in the crowd and provoked Jesus. Jesus cured his mental illness on the spot. As soon as he left the synagogue he went to eat at the home of his new disciples, Simon Peter. There he found that Peter's mother in law had a high fever. Jesus took her hand and the fever left the woman and before long they all sat down to dinner. While they ate, word of these miracles spread, of course; by sundown the house was surrounded by everyone in the area who was ill in mind or body. Jesus spent several hours laying his hands on them, and curing their maladies.

The next morning Jesus left the town and went out for a hike in the countryside. There he spent the morning praying and resting after such a busy day. Not even his disciples knew where he was. He did not bring them. He did not leave word with them. He did not take his cell phone. He left without a word, because he knew he needed a true rest. This ability to step away, and be completely still, seemed to be the key to Christ's success.

In my first church I visited the elderly. If you were in your nineties I checked in on you. When I spoke to one woman on the phone I asked if I could come in the morning, and she suggested the late afternoon, because she did not sleep as well when she was anticipating a morning visitor. So we agreed to meet one afternoon. The source of her longevity was that she did not try to pack too much into a day, and she guarded her sleep. She knew the importance of living with balance.

Finally, waiting can be sacred time, not lost time

Most of us have developed our ambitious schedules honestly. We don't want to waste time so we jam a lot into every day. We run so fast we forget that life is not an assignment but a gift. Time is God's gift to us. When God breathed life into us, God gave us time on this earth. When we are children time seems like a vast ocean, and it is hard to wait for your birthday, or Christmas. As you get older the pace of life picks up as you rush around in your teens and as a young adult. But when you begin to have a family God slows you down and you have to learn to wait. Waiting for a baby to be born is a long wait. Waiting for a child to fall asleep can force you to relax. Waiting for a teenager

to grow into wisdom can require patience. But time is a teacher too. Often when you are forced to slow down time can teach you its lessons- Only then can you learn to savor the slow intervals in life. You need time to think, to remember what is important, to sort through relationships, to discover new truth. You need time to find your path.

It worries me that we have lost our Sundays, our day of rest. The Sabbath was established by the ancient Hebrews as a glorious day of relaxation in a culture where the pagans worked in the fields or hunted for food every day. The Sabbath is meant to be a treat, when you enjoy good food in a leisurely way, and pause to worship God. We are whittling the Sabbath away, like the pagans of long ago. We wonder why we are so stressed. Stress relief is built into the schedule – its Sundays.

When you play music you learn that the rhythm of the piece is crucial and you cannot play well if you ignore the rests. Music without rests is just loud noise. God has built rest into every week. It is the Sabbath. It is time to sit still and think, pray, listen to good music, and come into the God's presence. It is the pause that refreshes you. The psalmist says, "Be still and know that I am God." Be still. Be still.