

Stewards of Grace

I Peter 4:7-11

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10 March 2013

The author of this letter, who is not the apostle Peter, but someone forging a letter in his name, announces to his original recipients that the “end of all things is near.” The author believed that the literal end of time was imminent. Now we, who live two thousand years later, are, quite clearly, aware that the end of human existence on earth, much less the end of cosmic time, was not imminent. That said, what can we gain from this letter today?

As I contemplated these verses, they boiled down to the core message – “If you are running out of time, here’s how you should live.” And that, I think can speak to us in 2013.

Do you have enough time in your day and your week to accomplish all of the tasks that you feel obligated to accomplish? I imagine that many of you are like me – anxious and overburdened with a long list of chores and tasks that never gets any shorter. And when you come home in the evenings or get a Saturday with no events on the schedule, you wrestle with whether you should collapse on the couch and rest or get up and *do* – run errands, work on that household project, finish your taxes, go to the gym, etc. There is just not enough time, not enough energy, even if you are the most organized, efficient, and productive of persons.

How did it get to be this way? Where we worry about “quality time” and get anxious at “wasted time.” All those new technologies were supposed to make us more organized, more efficient, and more productive. Sure, they’ve made our work more flexible and made it capable of getting more accomplished, but they’ve also gobbled up even more of our time. Now we check our work e-mail from our phones when we are on vacation. We can’t unplug and get away. We come out of a movie theatre and are bombarded by all the e-mails, texts, and voicemails that we missed for those two hours.

How we keep time is stressing us out. We know we need to relax more, play more, live more simply. Yet, we feel even those as obligations which turn into tasks that we must then schedule. “On Thursday at 8 p.m. after I’ve finished writing that memo I brought home and have put a load of laundry in the wash, then I’m going to do something fun.”

And it’s not that we hate our work. Some of us do, but many of us enjoy our work. We find it engaging and rewarding and it has become a part of our identity. Doing it well, accomplishing our goals, is vitally important to who we are and the joy we seek.

Our way of telling time is completely artificial – a product of industrial design and the Protestant work ethic which identified idleness with sin. For most of human history, we marked time by following the signs of nature – the changing of the seasons, the movement of the sun – not by arbitrary minutes and seconds which we have now trained ourselves to experience slipping by. Physicist Adam Frank writes, “You feel minutes in a way that virtually none of your ancestors did. You feel them pass and you feel them drag on with all the frustration, boredom, anxiety and anger that can entail. For you, those minutes are real.” Frank believes that we

need a more flexible, fluid way of marking time. He writes, "As individuals, the desire to build a new time springs from our deeply felt need to reclaim value and balance in our lives."

Our modern anxieties were not the concern of the author of this biblical letter, but I believe we can discover some wisdom in what he wrote. When we are running out of time, how should we live? How can we reclaim value and balance in our overworked lives? How can we make our work worthy?

Above all, maintain constant love for one another . . . be hospitable to one another . . . like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.

The first part of the author's answer was to "be serious and discipline yourselves," but I think we've had enough of that. So I skipped on down to the rest of the answer – love, hospitality, service – all of which fit under this lovely phrase "stewards of grace." For stewardship is what we are talking about -- not money and resource -- but time, energy, and involvement.

I recently read an article from the Harvard Business Review that said "time management" is dead. It has been a buzz word for a long time now, but, this article was saying, none of us can adequately manage everything we want and need to do. The author, Elizabeth Grace Saunders, wrote, "no one has time for everything. Given the pace of work and the level of input in modern society, time management is dead. You can no longer fit everything in — no matter how efficient you become."

Instead, she argued for "time investment." We must choose where we will invest our time, understanding that some things pay off and others distract us from the things that will pay off. Each of us has mundane things that we must get done, but we should spend more time on those activities which bring us closer to our goals and less time on the tasks that distract. Saunders herself was very clear that things like exercise, sleep, and relationships are long term time investments that help us to achieve even our work related goals.

This is one example of how we might become better stewards of our time.

Precisely when we are short on time, the author of Peter invites us to invest ourselves in love, hospitality, and service. I am not offering sentimental platitudes. What we are talking about here is difficult, particularly love. The philosopher Alva Noe writes, "Love . . . is an achievement. It doesn't come for free." He describes love as "a sustained openness to another person," something we have to learn and work at. He writes,

Openness to the other, over time, requires that one makes arrangements. You've got to be with the one you love, and this means you've got to make adjustments, adapt, shift, accommodate. Mature love is an achievement of dedication.

Maybe that quotes stresses you out even more? For I'm saying that when you are short on time, invest yourself in love, hospitality, and service. It seems that I'm simply adding to your list of responsibilities and tasks.

Being a steward of grace -- investing yourself in love, hospitality, and service -- does take

work, but it also takes play. Theologian Rita Nakashima Brock has written about love as “erotic power,” and she has identified the important connection between that power and being playful. “Play,” she writes, “is not frivolous or trivial, but life-sustaining. It is the basis of freedom, creativity, and spontaneity. . . . Through playing the heart heals, connects, and creates.” Play is part of the power that heals us and saves us.

Though I plan my sermons out months in advance, I am often surprised by how events in my own life end up aligning themselves with what I plan on preaching about. A few weeks ago I identified some signs of depression in myself and took the step of scheduling an appointment with a therapist. I had my first appointment this week and near the end of the session he told me that what I needed to do was have more fun. As I’ve shared that with some friends and some of you this week, quite a few have replied that they too are overworked overstressed and could probably use the exact same prescription – have more fun.

So, this Lent we are considering how to make our work worthy. Today the bible invites us to consider how we should live when we are running out of time. The answer is to be a steward of the manifold grace of God investing yourself in love, hospitality, and service. But, remember, this is a powerful, playful love. The grace of God invites us to make our work worthy by having more fun.