

July 21, 2024

Sermon Title: Redeem Your Time

Scripture: Mark 6:30-34; 53-56

Theme: Where preparation meets opportunity, our time is redeemed in the search for what is yet unknown.

Darrell Royal, former football coach for the Texas Longhorns once said: "Luck [Success] is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." I will have to say, in retrospect, that most of his Longhorn teams were prepared to the Red River Rivalry each year; his record as a coach reflected that preparation. My speech teacher in high school drilled into me the good practice of over-preparing for my debate and extemporaneous speeches, knowing that I would not use all that I had prepared, and knowing also that when, in debate, I had the opportunity for rebuttal, I would be ready for the moment. And, this practice of over-preparing carried over into test-taking as well. Rightly or wrongly, this practice has proved beneficial to me on many a final exam; you never know when the right question will magically appear, and you will be ready to give an answer. As with any memory work, though, there comes a saturation point at which all preparation falls apart, if you have not digested the knowledge into your inner being. Opportunity gives us the chance to become intimately familiar with what we have learned by rote; the chance to use our preparation in a practical way endears us to that learning and makes it all the more real. The danger is in overachieving, in the familiarity that breeds contempt, as the old saying goes, a familiarity that leads to disappointment in how we have used our time.

Certainly when Jesus visits his hometown of Nazareth, his neighbors get an up-close experience with him that amazes them. So, this is the carpenter's son that we have been hearing so much about; he is truly astounding, where did he get all that wisdom and power? The little boy we remember has grown up so quickly! The people of his hometown saw opportunity in his presence! Why hasn't he used all his power to help his sisters and brothers? And the rest of us? It seems to be true, doesn't it, that familiarity lowers respect and honor and even power! But, get outside his hometown, at a social distance, and things are different; crowds begin to form ahead of where he (and the disciples) are traveling. This is honor given to his reputation! Try to anticipate where he will go, and be there when he arrives. "If only we might come within touching him, or come within the bounds of his shadow, we might be healed, our fortunes might be changed in a heartbeat. People

see an opportunity and they go after it, using all the resources at their disposal, all the preparations they can muster in the moment, to redeem their time.

Ephesians 5:16 charges us to "make the most of the present opportunity." The Greek word used in this scripture is

"εξαγοραζομενοι" (Ex-agora-zomenoi) ,

which means "redeeming, ransoming, rescuing from loss and improving opportunity". The word is based on the Greek word "agora," which denotes what we call the marketplace. I actually like the King James translation the best, since it gives us a sense of our call to transform the marketplace in which we are involved. The King James version translates this word "Redeem the time" -- redeem the time that the Lord has given you. And, if we extend the idea to the marketplace, it might read "where preparation meets opportunity, live by values outside the values of the marketplace." Let go of the transactional mentality. Forget the exchange rate. Your money is no good here. You are now entering the twilight zone where heart, love, hope, and joy is all that matters. I say twilight zone, because this world is not a world where our experience can guide us. We are in uncharted waters, off the grid, swimming at our own risk, when we seek to go beyond the values of the marketplace!

The Gospel of Mark further tells us that many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. (31) What a statement! It reflects what we see today, does it not? As one person has put it, our leisure time is become thinner and thinner as we become busier and busier. Our leisure time is stretched to the breaking point and we neglect to take time for ourselves, even for the most critical of needs such as feeding our bodies. Another way to look at this is that the values of the marketplace are encroaching more and more into our personal lives. Our personal values are stretched to the breaking point. How shall we redeem our time?

Jesus leads his disciples to a deserted place where they (and he) can rest. Yes, a place outside the marketplace, a world apart from competition and anxiety, business and busy-ness, a place where envy and greed are absent; where people do not take advantage of your weaknesses, a place where you can trust and be trusted (Jer. 17:7). We used to surmise as camp counselors that many of the children in our care at summer camp need a break from home and school life, they need a world

beyond the normal, where peace and love abound, where grace is abundant, a world where they can shine and be themselves. “Our campers need that transport to a different world, if only for a week, so they can rest and experience something extraordinary, something apart from the ordinary! And, it need not be a week of camp, but it might also be a week of mission, a week of learning and serving, alongside others who come from different worlds. Both of these worlds are worlds apart from the marketplace, outside of its influence.

“They are like sheep without a shepherd,”(v.34) Jesus told his disciples, with compassion in his voice. We have a teachable moment for everyone, disciples, bystanders, students, scholars, hungry, homeless; this is an opportunity to meet the moment with compassionate ears and truth spoken in love. Jesus might have said to his disciples: “this is a moment for which we have prepared ourselves. Let’s redeem our time!”

Sheepgate is one title that our traditional theology gives to Jesus. John refers to Jesus as the “gate of the sheep,” whereby the sheep go out and come in. Some versions translate it as “door.” Jesus is the door by which we enter into healing. The prophet Hosea (chapter 2) invites us to understand the coming Messiah in a special way, speaking for God: “I will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope, a gateway of hope.” Achor is a valley known for misfortune and anger and trouble; it will be transformed into a gradually ascending gateway to the fertile vineyards of the hill country of Judah. Hosea, speaking for God, says: “I will bring my people to pasture through the Sheepgate of Achor,” Theologically, and poetically, it is a popular practice to engage in *prolepsis*, to think of the Sheepgate as Jesus, the Christ, the Anointed One. John records Jesus as saying: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture" (John 10:9). Jesus further states: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I know my own and my own know me.” (John 10:11-15)

One of the earliest statues found in the Christian catacombs was of a shepherd with a lamb wrapped about his shoulders and neck. The image of the shepherd is a true symbol among the people of the earliest congregations of Christians in Rome. University Christian Church in Fort Worth, Tx, near Texas Christian University and Brite Divinity School, displays a replica of this statue in their hallways. The idea behind this practice is that sheep are known to graze their way into being lost

and the shepherd finds the lost sheep and returns it to the fold. It is an image of compassion for those in the deepest of need. When Jesus asks Peter three times to “feed my sheep,” he has in mind that Peter should put on the cloak of compassion for those in need. In the same way that Peter has received compassion, he is asked to give compassion. The image of shepherd’s compassion is alive today, even beyond church hallways. Several pastoral care centers around the USA call themselves “the sheepgate” where people can come to receive wholeness and healing.

Like the pools of Bethesda in Jerusalem, Gennesaret was known as a place of healing. Many of the sick and injured traveled to this city along the sea of Galilee to bathe in the hot mineral springs at this city for healing purposes. I remember as a child traveling with my family to Sulphur, Oklahoma and the Platt National Park where we would stand in line at a pavilion where people were filling huge jugs with bromide water and medicine water and sulphur water. Northern Kansas had a similar place called “Waconda,” a place of ever-flowing springs that today feed Lake Waconda. People would come from miles around to fill up their jugs with life-giving waters. Many people truly believed in the healing qualities of these ever-flowing springs. So, perhaps it is not surprising to us that we find Jesus crossing over to this city in a boat as related in our scripture for today. In going to Gennesaret, Jesus is leading the crowd, after feeding them with loaves and fishes, into a healing place, into an open gate that will change their lives.

When Isaiah speaks of the day of universal peace he describes it as a time when God’s “gates shall stand open constantly; day and night they shall not be closed” (Isaiah 60:11). Because of the love of Jesus, the gates to the Kin[g]dom of God stand open. The Sheep’s Gate is the name of the one of the gates by which people entered into Jerusalem during the time of Jesus. This gate allowed shepherds to bring their sheep into the Temple for sacrifice. But, it also provided an entryway close to the Pools of Bethesda which were known as a place of healing to many in the ancient world. The disabled, the blind, the lame, the paralyzed, made their way to these Pools from all over the outlying lands. So strong was the history and sentiment related to these pools, that even the Romans later dedicated a temple to Asclepius, their god of healing, over these pools called Bethesda. Jesus visited these pools during the 2nd Passover of his ministry. You may remember how Jesus encountered a man who had been lying beside these pools for 38 years waiting for someone to take him into the pools at just the right moment when the

waters in the pools stirred so that he could be healed. The people believed that if one could enter the pools at the precise moment when the water stirred or moved that they could be healed. But, Jesus first asks the man if he wants to get well. And when the man responds asking for help, Jesus says to him, "Pick up your mat and walk." (John 5:1-9). And, no doubt, the reputation of Jesus increased with this healing and perhaps even led to further rumors about the pools of Bethesda.

And so, too, we come back to the theme, that where preparation meets opportunity, we can redeem our time, providing a nature's retreat type of sanctuary for healing, providing mission for healing and hope, and providing space apart from the values of the marketplace, where the values of Jesus may be nurtured and brought to life. May we at WOCC redeem our time this summer at mission as well as retreat, finding spaces where our preparation meets opportunity, where grace meets excellence, carving out a space for renewal where the values of the marketplace are kept at bay and the values of Jesus are brought into play for the greater good! Alleluia! Amen,