

Straining Gnats and Swallowing Camels: Time is Ticking  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
July 9, 2006  
Scripture: Exodus 20:8-11, Ecclesiastes 3, Mark 1:14-15

Religion should reflect and speak to our deepest concerns, but sometimes religion is used instead to distract us from our real priorities. Over and over again in the gospels, Jesus has sharp conflicts with other religious authorities of his day, who were peddling a legalistic brand of religion that avoided the real matters of life and faith. Finally one day, Jesus had had enough. The 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the gospel of Matthew records a long speech, a diatribe, of Jesus' teachings set over and against the teachings and practices of other religious voices. Over and over, Jesus contrasts careful attention to what he believed should be our priorities with the showiness of the scribes and Pharisees in paying attention to lesser matters. Six times in this chapter, Jesus says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" chiding them for their misplaced priorities. As an example,

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! (Matthew 23:23-24)

And from that memorable phrase, we have a sermon title for a three-week series on key Christian priorities. We thought that worked much better than quoting Jesus' other words, "Woe to you, hypocrites!" as a sermon title. Don't you agree? But those harsh words of Jesus also serve as a warning to us when we try and speak about priorities. If we are not careful about matching our words with our deeds, if we do not try to "walk our talk," it would be easy to be labeled a hypocrite. But talk about our deepest values we must, with humility, and with no small amount of courage.

Every week we receive an offering, and we say something like "we offer our gifts of time, talents, and money to be used for God's glory." How we use our time, our talents, and our money is a big part of how we make our lives. Those three gifts – time, talent, and money – reflect our real lives and exhibit our priorities. So this week, the stewardship of time, next week, Camille will preach on talents, and on July 23, I will preach on the stewardship of money.

So, time. As the Steve Miller [rock] Band sang, "time keeps on ticking, ticking, ticking, into the future." Time is one of the great gifts we have been given. But time, at least as us humans experience it, is not limitless. Parents know this all too well. How often have we heard parents at a graduation say something like, "it was only yesterday that she was going off to kindergarten." As the wise teacher of Ecclesiastes wrote long ago and Kristin just sang, "for everything, there is a season. A time to be born, and a time to die."

Have I mentioned that Central appears in the final scene of the movie, *A Prairie Home Companion*? (Another shameless plug.) In the movie, a character asks Garrison Keillor if he is sad about it being the last show, and his response, I think, is exactly right. “Every show is the last show.”

For this is our time. Now. We may not be here next year, or ten years from now, but we are alive and breathing now. Jesus’s words as he called the first disciples are still pertinent to us 21<sup>st</sup> century followers: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, so repent and believe in the good news. So how should we make the most of the time that we do have? How do we live in the present in a way that not only brings joy and happiness and meaning, but how do we use our time in a way that has significance beyond ourselves? Or, speaking from a theological lens, how do we use our time in a way that has divine significance? How do we use our time to bring God glory, how do we use our time to participate in God’s realm, God’s kingdom?”

Ironically, I do not think that the answer is that we should DO more and more, packing as much as we can into every single minute of our life. Some of us go about our life as though we could usher God’s kingdom into being through our relentless actions on behalf of what is right and good and just. This sermon is not a call to do more.

We live and work in a frenetic time. Sociologists are not sure whether we are busier than people who lived in previous times, but it is clear that we 21<sup>st</sup> century first-world folks feel our lives are busier. We bring cell phones on what are supposed to be the most relaxing of vacations, so we can keep up with the office. We are tied to our work with pagers and productivity goals and threats of an uncertain economy. Our children are involved in activity after activity. We are busy – or feel busy. And every once in a while, if we stop to reflect, we realize that we, or someone we know who is like us, is busy, busy, busy but no longer knows why. We have become like a character from *Alice in Wonderland*.

There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!” (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket, and looked at it, and then hurried on, “Oh my ears and whiskers, how late it’s getting!”

Like the rabbit checking his watch and racing off, we 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans know that we are busy, but we have lost our bearings about why we are busy in the first place. So now, more than ever perhaps, we need to listen again for the Bible’s understanding of time, how precious it is, how we are to use and enjoy it. So, let us travel back in time, to hear Moses address the people with Ten Commandments, ten rules for living faithful lives.

It is, I believe, a great irony. Most Americans give high credibility to the Ten Commandments. We claim to base our legal system on them. When I was in Alabama last month, I saw billboards promoting the candidacy of Judge Roy Moore, who became famous for refusing to move a huge monument of the Ten Commandments from the Alabama State Supreme

Court building. We have a great deference for the Ten Commandments. But these commandments are harder than we might realize to keep. And sometimes, we downright ignore them. Take, as a prime example, this fourth commandment. The commandment that we are to “remember the sabbath, and keep it holy. Six days,” it says, “you should labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.”

Keeping Sabbath. For many people, these words bring back an antiquated memory of a long, dull day doing nothing. Perhaps you remember the stories of Laura Ingalls Wilder, or Huckleberry Finn – forced as restless kids to endure the Sabbath, to do nothing but sit all day in the parlour.

And that was largely how this commandment was interpreted for a long time. According to the Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards that was written in the 1640s and played a formative role in American Presbyterianism.

The Sabbath, or Lord’s Day, is to be sanctified by an holy resting all that day, not only from such works as are at all times sinful, but even from such worldly employments and recreations as are on other days lawful; and making it our delight to spend the whole time (except so much of it as is to be taken up in works of necessity and mercy) in the public and private exercise of God’s worship.<sup>1</sup>

This understanding of the Sabbath used to be built into social structures through what were called “blue laws” that required movie theaters to be closed on Sundays. Same with gas stations and grocery stores. Sunday was to be a day of rest and church and family. No one should be exposed to those temptations to work. No one was too low on the totem pole to have to work on these Sunday shifts.

Now, of course, in our global economy, business does not shut down any day or night. And in our wonderfully diverse, multicultural world, if we polled our neighbors, we would not come to an agreement on even what day we should remember as the Sabbath. I would not be in favor of re-instituting any new blue laws that would privilege any one religion’s understanding of Sabbath.

So what does this commandment mean for us here and now? When some people are too busy, and others are not busy enough. When some of us are so used to going full speed, that when we have a moment off we just collapse in an exhausted heap. How should we understand this commandment?

Biblical scholar Terence Fretheim writes that “God’s resting is a divine act that builds into the very created order of things a working / resting rhythm. Only when that rhythm is honored by all is the creation what God intended it to be.”<sup>2</sup>

This commandment to keep the Sabbath recalls the story of creation. God creating the world, in the poetic words, in six days and then resting. Out of nothingness, out of chaos, God creating order and life then resting. Fretheim continues,

Sabbath-keeping is an act of creation-keeping. To keep the sabbath is to participate in God's intention for the rhythm of creation. Not keeping the sabbath is a violation of the created order; it returns one aspect of that order to chaos.<sup>3</sup>

So keeping the Sabbath is not following some antiquated legalism, straining at gnats. Observing Sabbath rest is at the heart of being faithful to our God. It is about participating in all of creation in a healthy way. The Sabbath, as Jesus put it in another argument with the Pharisees, the Sabbath was made for people. Let me suggest three things we can do to remember and keep the Sabbath.

The biblical sense of time has deep social implications of justice and dignity. The commandment to keep the Sabbath reminds us all that we are one part of God's created order. We are not above other people, or above the rest of creation, for that matter. We need to be in balance with others and with all creation.

But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son, or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

In the worldview of the Bible, “the sabbath is a fundamentally egalitarian institution. The sabbath rest is for all, rich and poor, master and servant, human beings and animals.”<sup>4</sup> Rest is not just for the wealthy, for those who can afford it. So, a first suggestion. We need to help our society understand this key concept – that time is not money and everyone should be able to participate in rhythms of dignified work and rest.

Second, we need to regain and reclaim a sense of personal Sabbath rhythms in our world of 24-7 media. In our work world that expects us to be constantly tethered to pagers and cell phones, to be checking email even from the beach, we need to find Sabbath rest for our lives. It is practical – it keeps us from burnout, or patterns of frantic activity followed by shutdowns. It is theological, reminding us that we are creatures, not robots, and even our creator God spent time in rest. A healthy sense of time is what keeps us human, in its deepest sense. Give yourself permission to take regular breaks for worship and rest.

Finally – the Bible insists, the time is now. It is not too late for God, but the time is ripe. As Jesus put it when he began calling his first disciples, the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has drawn near. If we really believe that – that the time is being fulfilled, it means a radical change needs to happen in our priorities. If the time is being fulfilled, now, that means don't put off until tomorrow what really matters. Don't waste your time on things that don't matter. On a hot day like today, take time for a cool glass of lemonade. But don't spend all your time straining the gnats out while swallowing camels, for God cares deeply about what we do with our time. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Confessions, 7.227

<sup>2</sup> Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991) 230.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.