

Telling Time
Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle
August 14, 2016

You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? (Luke 12:56)

Telling time is something we learn at an early age although I wonder these days with the 'digitization of everything' whether our young children can still tell time looking at an ordinary clock. Even the clock in the back of the sanctuary is digital. Its glowing red numerals are supposed to keep worship leaders on schedule but I am often transported to a basketball arena and imagine a loud buzzer rather than an organ postlude when the time to close is upon us. So I hope some of you teachers and grandparents can reassure me after worship that our youth still know why Mickey has a short hand and a long hand! Time plays such an important function in our lives telling us when to go to work, when to go to church, and when to blow out the candles. There are those who believe that time rules with unrelenting tyranny in our overscheduled, always connected lives and that we need to slow down. But that isn't this morning's message.

No. In this morning's Gospel reading Jesus is anxious about limited time. He is frustrated that his followers either do not recognize or do not accept that the times are changing. Jesus has a scheduled event and there is an unmistakable sense of urgency in his words. He uses strong language with a decided edge when he describes the stress that he is under in these final months of his ministry. He uses strong language to describe how many will respond to his words foretelling division between father and son; daughter and mother. He uses strong language for those who hear his words and are not moved to action. "You hypocrites!" he calls them; a word he also used to describe the Pharisees and Scribes. How are we to understand the Prince of Peace when he says "I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled!?" How are we to interpret the Teacher, the Master who earlier

preached "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." When he says "Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" Sons against fathers, daughters against mother's; it simply doesn't sound like Jesus. And then he abruptly transitions to a metaphor about weather and time. It's almost as though he is sleep deprived and suffering under a great deal of stress.

If we fast forward to our present time, what signs of change are taking place right now that call us to respond in a particular way; a way that might even cause us to be divided from colleagues, friends, and family?

As it turns out that's exactly what is going on at this moment. You may recall that several weeks ago Jesus's ministry took an intentional turn and Jesus "set his face toward Jerusalem." "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" This baptism is not a polite sprinkling of water or even a refreshing dip in the Jordan River. The baptism that is on Jesus' mind is his death on the cross – and time is running out. The Scottish clergymen, theologian and author F. F. Bruce is a favorite "go to" resource for insight into Jesus' most vexing comments. I was not surprised that he devotes five articles to this morning's selection! As Prof. Bruce notes in the opening essay "The fire was there in Jesus's ministry, but the earth had not yet caught fire." (*Hard Sayings of Jesus*, Inter-Varsity Press, p. 124)

This is an interesting observation and one that many of us can relate to. How often in our endeavors as God's co-creators do we feel disheartened because we fail to see results? It is a reminder of a truth that comforts but doesn't always satisfy: that no kindness is wasted however great or small the effect. Jesus

clearly feels constrained by time and the change he expected to see by now is not visible even to him. What is he looking for? Division! If his message were being rightly heard, it would stir passions so deep that those who did not share them would feel separated. If those in your immediate natural family did not share your sense of call to follow Christ, well then that could not be allowed to slow you down. The time is now!

One of the ongoing challenges in reading Scripture and understanding its meaning for our own lives is the sense of time. Even physicists are challenged by the meaning of time; a concept that seems so ably captured by our watches and other timepieces. We non-physicists think of time in a very linear fashion and therefore we might well ask whether the change that Jesus alludes to in this passage from Luke has already taken place? Has the scorching heat brought by the south wind already passed by? How are we to understand the urgency of this morning's gospel message 2,000 years later? Might Jesus be talking in Creation Time which might be measured in eras, epochs or ages? Geologists use the term era being to mean several hundred million years. An age encompasses a mere several million years so that the most recent era would include the early emergence of humankind. But I find nothing in the literature that suggests Jesus is thinking in creation time. He is thinking as we do, about tomorrow and the next day.

If we fast forward to our present time, what signs of change are taking place right now that call us to respond in a particular way; a way that might even cause us to be divided from colleagues, friends, and family? What do we see in the increasingly autocratic and aggressive behavior of leaders in China, Thailand, Turkey, Russia and Hungary? How are we to respond to the 65 million migrants forced to leave their homeland due to famine, civil war, political retribution, or ethnic cleansing? If the actions of this nation, however well intended, contributed to this migration how does that inform our response? How do we interpret a wealth gap that is reaching record levels not just in this country but in many others as well? What are we to make of political leaders who

advocate separation by exiting agreements designed to unify or by building barriers? As Christians, do we "know" the answer but fail to act? As Christians are we free to act entirely in our own self-interest ignoring the common good? By our acts or failures to act, are we too hypocrites?

Thinking about this week's sermon I've had a song from my college days ricocheting inside my head. Do any of you remember the band Chicago and one of their biggest hits, Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is? One of the memorable characteristics of the band was a prominent brass section and this song has a great trumpet line that is a perfect bridge to the lyrics. If any of this rings a bell, you'll know that the second line of the song was: "Does anybody really care?" And that is exactly the question Jesus has been asking with some frustration because he gets the strong sense that, "No", nobody really cares. They are all too willing to ignore the signs that are as obvious as clouds rising in the west. They are all too set in their ways, too comfortable with the way things are to respond to the fire Jesus has kindled.

I suspect that there are few of us who are well versed in weather wisdom. I remember just one from my sailing days both in the Navy and with my college friends; it was "Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning. Red sky at night, sailors delight." But of course Jesus uses weather wisdom as a metaphor for the social-political changes that were surely obvious to the astute observer. But I think it's fair to ask just how obvious the signs were to the average person on the streets of Judah. Let's consider how much more slowly news traveled in those days. But the same cannot be said about our own time and place where we are continually bombarded with information. Indeed, the challenge for the current time is to separate the wheat from the chaff; the significant from the distracting; the true from the false. But how do we interpret? How do we respond in a highly structured society with lots of rules designed to protect those least likely to have a voice?

Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is? What is Jesus trying to tell us in this sermon about bringing fire to the earth and causing division? As God co-

creators we are called to actively love our neighbor as exemplified by the Good Samaritan. That was not a passive, theoretical loving of neighbor; this was a crossing the street, dressing his wounds, and transporting him to the nearby inn, loving of neighbor. It was also a check writing love of neighbor for he promised to cover additional expenses. So what about us – how do we understand what it means to be God’s co-creator; to love our neighbor like the good Samaritan? Where do we find the energy and the courage not to mention the time?

I must confess to indulging in more Olympics last week than I had intended. I should also say I was a little disappointed in how little I saw beyond swimming and a tiny bit of women’s gymnastics. But I was struck over and over again how medal winners remembered those who had preceded them especially where a legacy of team dominance went back several Olympiads. But Ryan Murphy’s comment was especially memorable. Murphy is one of the great backstrokers and as I understand it this was the sixth straight Olympics that team USA won both backstroke events. In an interview after winning his second race, he talked about having received letters from others who had preceded him on the podium wearing gold. Feeling the near spiritual connection to these earlier champions gave him focus, confidence, and purpose that strengthened his own performance. Knowing that he was part of a cloud of earlier swimmers helped him to persevere and find that deep inner strength to continue the legacy.

Our reading from the book of Hebrews ends with the opening verses of chapter 12 which is one of the great, moving passages in the New Testament and often heard on Reformation Sunday, All Saints Day, or during installations of deacons, elders and pastors. “So great a cloud of witnesses enveloping us, let us lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely,”. (Hebrews 12:1) It is a summary of the verses that precede which list or make reference to the many throughout Hebrew Scripture who accomplished great deeds by virtue of faith. As William Barclay summarizes: “The whole list is made up of individuals who faced incredible odds for God.

It cites people who never believed that God was on the side of big battalions and were willing to take tremendous even terrifying risks for God – those who cheerfully and courageously and confidently accepted God-given tasks that, on human terms, were impossible. It is, says Barclay “The honor roll of history of people who chose to be in God’s minority rather than with the world’s majority.” (*The Daily Study Bible*, Hebrews, p. 193)

I think that is a succinct restating of the division Jesus expects of us. We choose to be part of God’s minority rather than the world’s majority. We choose to actively love our neighbor; not to discriminate, fear, reject, or otherwise exclude. We choose to do this even at some cost to ourselves; even when the task seems too great. If we find ourselves flagging let us not forget that we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. Let us draw strength from them so that we may run with perseverance the race that is set before us. This is a noble challenge that often feels beyond our grasp. “When we are discouraged,” Barclay reminds us, “let us remember and take heart again. God’s power has not grown less. What he did once he can do again, for the God of history is the same God we worship today. (Ibid., p. 196)

Thanks be to our steadfast God.

Amen