

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
5th Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2009

Mothers, Grandmothers, & the Gifts of Time

Proverbs 31:10-31; Ephesians 5:15-20

This year I bought Mary Ellen's Mother's Day card at Borders.
James and I were browsing the cards together,
laughing at the funny ones,
looking for the one that was just right.

We found some great cards there,
one from me, one from the kids, and one from Lucy (the dog).

I also found one that I would never buy, not in a million years!

It said:

*We know that being a Mother isn't easy.
If it were easy, then Fathers could do it!*

Well, the truth hurts I guess;
and there are several level's of truth to that little dig.
One level, surely, is the sense of awe that ought to be ours
when we contemplate the task of motherhood.

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Now today, several of our mothers will be absent from worship
because they are participating in
the Race for the Cure -
the national race for the cure of breast cancer.

It's quite appropriate, really, to hold this event on Mother's Day,
not only for the obvious reasons related to the cure of breast cancer,
but also because "a race" seems to be
a perfect metaphor for motherhood.

My general impressions of motherhood
- from observing my own wife,
and the moms of our community and city,
and even moms in other parts of the world -
is that motherhood is often a race.

Life itself for everyone often feels like a race,
and motherhood is all about life:
conceiving life, birthing life, nourishing life,
nurturing life, preserving life, growing life,
sustaining life, protecting life;

in short, loving life.

I wonder if life has always felt like this for mothers.

Thousands of years ago, right here where we live,
there were communities of the early Native Americans
who followed the receding glaciers of the Ice Age
up through Western Pennsylvania
and settled along the three rivers.

First, they were hunters and gatherers,
and later they began to make tools
and put them into the soil to till the earth.

It was a simpler time, to be sure,
but still a race:
perhaps less industrial, more organic,
but no less vital for their survival.

Their husbands racing to kill enough game to feed the village,
while they raced to gather enough,
plant, grow and harvest enough to feed their families
each year before the onset of winter.

Still, I have to think life was less stressful for them,
living in the midst of a pristine wilderness,
rivers teeming with life, a myriad variety of birds,
forests of thousand year old trees.

In those days, stress was relieved the old fashioned way:
if the bear was chasing you, you ran away from it;
if the other tribe was attacking you,
you fought them off with a tomahawk;
No anti-anxiety or anti-depressant meds in those days.

Today our race is of a different sort –
and we have the suspicion, don't we,
that much of our stress in this race is self-induced.

And what are we racing against?
Against time?

* * * * *

While the early natives of America were hunting, gathering, and planting,
some wise soul on the other side of the world
was writing a Proverb about a capable woman.

Proverbs 31 was written in a very different culture than ours,
in a very different time.

So we have to put up with the somewhat patriarchal nature of the text
that defines a woman primarily in terms of
her usefulness to the household
and her support of her husband.

But, even under the oppressive forces of patriarchy,
this Proverb shows something of the passion and sense of calling
with which mothers devote themselves to their families.

Whatever the situation,
being a mother calls for grit, toughness, and endurance.
*She works with willing hands...she rises while it is still night...
she provides food for her household...she girds herself with strength...
her lamp does not go out at night...she opens her hand to the poor...
strength and dignity are her clothing...she laughs at the time to come...*

She laughs at the time to come.
There it is again...time.

Here is a woman who seems NOT to be in a race.
She is clearly not passive, not lazy, not indolent;
she burns the candle at both ends,
with all she accomplishes, she seems to find ends of the candle
I didn't know existed!

But nothing in this Proverb suggests that she is stressed out.
This woman seems perfectly capable of handling all these requirements
without getting tired, or complaining, or resenting her husband
while he struts about the city gates, gathering up prestige.

Is it just me?
Or do you get the sense that it was not the capable wife herself
who wrote this proverb?
Perhaps it was written on one of the first Mother's Day cards...

At any rate, time does not seem to be much of a factor or a concern
for this woman who churns out productivity.
She seems to live by the same dictate as is urged on us by
the author of Ephesians, who says
make the most of time, for the days are evil.

I actually prefer the older translation, which says

Redeem the time, for the days are evil.

Redeem the time. Save the time.

Take time back from the powers of darkness that have stolen it from you,
from the evil powers that are using the time to eat away at life,
to resist God's purposes.

Redeem the time from evil. Redeem it for the sake of good.
Save time.

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In the Greek world,
there were two concepts of time:
Chronos and *Kairos*.

Chronos, from which we derive our word "chronological,"
means "a span of time" or "historic time."

Chronos time is what we see when we pull out our calendars
to make an appointment.

It is the time we see when we look at our watches.

It can be measured in seconds, minutes, hours, and days
that go ticking away.

Chronos time is also measured in
birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, and retirements.

Chronos time is the stress we experience
when we just don't see how we're going to get it all done.

Chronos time is what we mean when we look at the month of May
and say, "Lord have mercy, this is a crazy time of year."

Kairos time...is when the Lord has mercy.

Kairos, in the Greek, refers to a time of significance,
a time with some expectation attached,
a time in which God acts decisively
and calls for decisive human response,
a time that is infused with
"the rich and incalculable and gracious goodness of God."ⁱ

Kairos is when the eternal reaches into history,
when the unseen world of grace
suffuses the visible world of matter and space and *chronos* time

Kairos is less of a minute and more of a moment.

Kairos is pregnant time;

it may glow with the radiance of new motherhood,
but *kairos* time may also scream in the throes of labor pain.

The challenge for mothers, it seems,
is to be open to receive *Kairos* when it happens;
to have the eyes to recognize the time of grace
when it occurs.

(It is an equal challenge for fathers, but this is Mother's Day,
so that's who we're focusing on.)

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The race we live makes it hard for us to receive the *Kairos* moment
when it comes.

"A few years ago,
Joshua Bell, a world-class violinist,
was asked by Gene Weingarten of *The Washington Post*
to play near an entrance to a Washington, D.C., subway station.

His performance was [videotaped](#)
so that the reactions of commuters could be studied.

Bell selected what he considered
the most beautiful pieces of music ever written.
He stood for hours in a busy station playing one piece after another.
Only a few people even noticed him,
and at the end of the day,
he had collected less than thirty dollars in tips.

Yet all the children who passed him wanted to watch and listen.
On the video, they can be seen tugging at their parents' arms
and turning their faces toward Bell
even as they are being led away.

One woman did recognize Bell,
and as thousands of fellow commuters rushed by,
she listened in amazement to his entire performance." ⁱⁱ

Perhaps in less dramatic ways,
there are moments of grace available to us all
each day.

It takes wisdom to recognize these times,
to take a deep breath,
and let God transform our minutes in to moments." ⁱⁱⁱ

These moments happen all the time...
...like a little over 12 years ago,
when I pushed Langley's foot, in utero,
and she kicked back.

...like this week when I watched James
literally sitting on the edge of his seat
as he listened to his sister singing a solo in the choral concert.
...like sitting with Langley on a sandstone ledge
watching a Southwestern sunset
over Lake Powell, Arizona.
...like yesterday, watching James make a sliding catch in left field.

These are *chronos* minutes
that become *kairos* moments.
These are the gifts of time.

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Now some of you mothers here today
(and the fathers and the aunts and uncles)
are thinking about your own *Kairos* moments.
But I can also hear some of you mothers out there
beating yourselves up for not having it together enough
to enjoy your *Kairos* moments.
Now in addition to managing everything else on your *chronos* calendar
you've got this *kairos* calendar to juggle into the mix.
Thanks, Pastor Mike!
But the last thing you need,
is something else to feel guilty about.

And the good news is that
these gifts of time cannot be managed or produced.
They are gifts.
You cannot control them, or choose when you receive them.
But you can start somewhere simple:
Perhaps with a prayer at the beginning of the day,
or just before you're going to see your family
after school lets out, or after you arrive home from work.
Just a little prayer
that God would give you the grace to see
the wonder of your children today,
or the blessings of your spouse,
or the beauty of your surroundings,
or the joy of your relationships.

But there is another prayer – equally as important, equally as real.

That God would enable you to be open to the *Kairos* moment
even when it comes to you as pain.
Let's not be Polyanna about Motherhood.
After all, what woman's life is actually as perfect and successful
as the woman of Proverbs 31?
Even those who do accomplish a great deal for their families
often do so at great personal cost,
and rarely feel as accomplished as this imaginary woman.

The *Kairos* moment, the moment of grace,
of the eternal infusing the time-bound,
is not always pleasant or easy.
It may be the most painful thing you've every experienced.
The labor pains of bearing children do not cease;
indeed, bearing the pain of our children
is a lifetime of labor

The assurance of the scripture is that even in the pain
God is present and alive and graciously at work.
In our worry over our children,
in our dismay at their choices and failures,
in our fear for their lives and livelihood,
in the agony of separation,
God is present and alive and graciously at work.
In this sense, motherhood and fatherhood,
are means by which we may enter more deeply
into the life-giving heart of God,
our Heavenly Father, our Nurturing Mother.

What if you pray that your pain
would lead you further into the loving heart of God,
who has borne all pain for your sake?
Our children are born and go out from us.
When they go out, God alone can fill the emptiness that remains.
God alone can soothe the pain of the heart.
And so we pray,
God, let my pain become the place where I meet you
and find myself transformed.

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In closing a quick word to Grandmothers.

You Grandmothers (and Grandfathers) are especially blessed;

and the good thing is, you know it!
Not just because you get to enjoy the grandkids and then give them back
full of sugar and spoiled with attention.
You are blessed and you know it
because you have lived the race,
and you have become aware in hindsight
of just how many *Kairos* moments happen:

how many sacred moments,
how much grace abounds,
how nourishing to the soul is this blessed human connection
full of joy, full of pain, full of promise, full of life.

Now you have the blessing of another time around,
to see and hear and touch and smell
and enjoy the gifts of time.

With this blessing comes a calling, and you know it better than I do.
A calling to guide us moms and dads to see what you see.

To help us redeem the time
so that in the race of life.
we not get so caught up in the running
that we forget to live.

ⁱ "Kairos" in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p 459.

ⁱⁱ Mary Pipher, "Stopping for Joshua Bell," in *Psychotherapy Networker*, March/April 2009, p. 50.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 51.