

The Luxury of Time

Dr. Richard M. Cromie

Bay Head Chapel

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It's a tall order to impress friends and family with a timely and inspiring sermon when you have retired from active duty and have fallen out of the routine and rhythm of preaching. But knowing that we would be coming to the Chapel, where all our friends of 30-40 years would be listening, I knew I could not reach down into the old barrel and reissue one of my ancient goodies. With my wife, children and grandchildren in the congregation as well, I knew better. One minister described the particular problem of the preacher's wife: She has to live with him all week long, and then pretend he is the voice of God come Sunday morning.

That's why I was delighted when I felt a sermon coming from so unlikely a source as a political convention. This sermon took root and began to grow as I watched the opening of the Democratic Party's National Convention on television. It was at this assembly that Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts and Sen. John Edwards of my new home state of North Carolina were nominated to run for the highest positions in the land.

The moment of inception came as part of the convention's tribute to those who perished in the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001, a morning in which Mrs. Cromie and I were in Bay Head, NJ, at the Chapel's manse. We were leisurely packing to begin our drive back to Palm Beach, Florida, where I was Pastor at the time. It was an extremely sad day for all Americans, but sadder by far for those who lost loved ones and friends in the horror of the day, some of whom are within the sound of my voice this morning.

A particular woman had been invited to speak; not a noted politician, nor especially a party enthusiast, but someone who had lost a couple of immediate family members and several close friends in the collapse of the World Trade Center towers. It was a touching speech that brought tears to my eyes. But when she uttered the lines I want you to focus on today, everything else drifted away. Without alerting me to the impact of what was coming, I suddenly heard her say:

“We all thought we would have had much longer to enjoy them and surround them with our loving care. We took the luxury of time for granted. We assumed they would always be there, or at the least, that they would return home that night. And all of a sudden, they were gone. I ask you to remember them with me now.”

Most of us assume that the luxury of time will always be ours to have and to hold. We assume that the ones we love and need too much to lose will always be there. But as W. H. Auden noted curtly in one of his poems, “I assumed that love would last forever. I was wrong!” So are we. “You know not what a day may bring forth,” the Bible says. And we don’t!

There is a familiar Pennsylvania Dutch that makes the point: “Vee get too soon oldt, und too late schmardt.”

Think about it. It means that time flies. The days of our years are three score and ten. If by reason of strength they be four score, yet is their strength labor and sorrow, for it is soon cut off and we fly away. I remember telling my father 25 years ago how quickly time seemed to be passing. He said, “Just wait and see.” I have and I see how it is truer the older we get.

Have you ever heard the story about the couple in Scotland who were celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary? Auld Jock decided to take her over to Ireland to visit her ancestral home. She was so excited. She went out and bought a new hat

and a new pair of shoes, got her hair done, packed her bag, and off they drove to Stranraer, where the ferry leaves for Belfast.

Poor thing, she was so excited, and in such a hurry to get to the ferry, that she tripped over her new shoes, fell down and hurt her leg. Much delayed, they missed the last boat. So, they had to spend the night in a funny-looking little walk-up rented room that was ill-suited for a special anniversary.

But she decided to make the most of it anyway. As she sat there at the vanity, with her once lovely brown hair turning a trifle gray, she began to run the comb through it. She smiled at Jock and said, "Oh, Johnny Boy, it might be winter in my hair, but it's summer in my heart!"

"Yeah," he replied, "but if there had been spring in your feet, Maggie, we would nae ha missed the ferry."

And so it goes. First comes the morning light, then the dawn, then midday, followed by afternoon. Then along comes evening. In his wonderful book, "The Art of Growing Older," John Cowper Powyss wrote that evenings were his favorite time of day. The hard work is over, energy begins to lag, the night is drawing nigh, and it is a quieter time inside the soul. "Pray God that there will be someone you love waiting for you at the end of your days, a spouse or child or friend, or even a little puppy," Powyss said. From the Midlands of England, he wrote that his most favorite evenings were the ones in which he could take his dog out for a long walk along the sea, then turn around and come back home when both were tired and ready for the night.

"You are foolish if you allow the waning days or years to tear away your happiness by pondering unkept promises or unfulfilled desires," Powyss wrote, but if we refuse to succumb to those failings, we can become more sensitive and more open to the inner joys and peace.

St. Paul wrote that when he became a man, he gave up his childish ways. Most people don't, Powyss observed, "It is all so simple. If you do it right, there is no fear, no regrets, no looking back. The closer you get to home, the more relieved you feel. And when you see the light in the house waiting there at the top of the hill, you know that everything is going to work out fine."

"Those near the end seldom say please, they always say thank you," Annie Dilliard, the famous Pulitzer Prize Winner, once added.

Ecclesiastes agrees: "There is a time for everything under the sun." There is a time to be young and youthfully eccentric. But then a time comes for more serious things, maybe parenthood, responsibility, caring for others, changing the world. Karl Jung wrote that problems arise when we do not live each stage as it comes along. If you miss what is meant for a current period of your life, you will spend the rest of your life trying to go back for it. Frustration occurs when you try to get there and to capture what you missed. There is nothing quite as funny as an old man trying to be young (or an old woman either). But every day we see God's children carrying baggage that is far too heavy, stumbling under the weight of it, trying to keep up, not with the Joneses but with all that they intended to become themselves. It is far better to drop those burdens of what might have been, at the side of the road.

There is a time and a season for everything under the sun. There is a time to be born, and a time to die. We do not choose the moment of our birth. We do not choose the moment we depart. God gives us the gift of life when it is time for us to be here upon the earth—that is, when He has need of us. When that need is over, we exit stage left. Period. Over and out.

"There is a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted." It is true in the fields of grain, but truer in the fields our experience. Wise is the person who

knows when it is time to pick up and leave a bad relationship, a stressful job, a career, a grudge, a worry, a broken dream; who learns to forgive those who have wronged you, and in the end, to be free yourself.

“There is a time to seek and a time to lose, a time to keep and a time to cast away.”
Then the summary: “I know that whatsoever God does, it will be forever. Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it, for to everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under the heavens.”

That time rolls on is certain. There is a proper time to perform certain actions. Men and women should seize that moment of time to do the appropriate thing. Each event fits into its appointed niche.

In “The Valley of the Kwai” a young soldier penned these lines:

What shall I think
When I am called to die?
Shall I not think too soon my life has ended,
With so little done of all that I intended.

There were so many things I'd had meant to try,
So many contests I had hoped to win,
But lo, the end approaches, just as I
Was thinking of preparing to begin.

The luxury of time. Even little children sense it with the way things change, or just when summer is over. Every parent knows it as children begin to grow. “I was born, then I went to school,” the young lady told me, “and the next thing I knew I was a den mother.”

I sigh, then kiss you

**For I must own
That I shall miss you
When you have grown.**

That's Shelley, but it could be anybody.

Those with young men and women from their families or friends' families stationed in Iraq, Afghanistan or other places in the world also know it. They pray that military messengers never come knocking at their door.

Olympic competitors know the value of time. The luxury of a hundredth of a second sometimes makes the difference between success and failure. The four American women who were predestined to win the 4x100 relay race might have won with ease, but when Marion Jones was about to hand off the baton to Lauryn Williams, time and chance took over; they dropped the baton and were out of the race. Time is measured. When it is over, it is mercilessly final.

People in the middle years of life know it as well as the young and old. When life begins to settle in and you realize you are about to walk on a level path for the rest of your days, it can get dreary. And you realize that if you have not "made it" as yet, you are probably not going to. What you have wanted most in life will probably elude you forever; the luxury of time comes crashing in.

Time looks like a constant, a given, a stable commodity of the passing decades. "The days of our years are three score and ten", the Bible says. But Einstein showed us a century ago that time is relative. It depends on where you are when you look at it.

"We always intended to take a small house on the Eastern Shore of Maryland," a woman told me long ago. "We always thought there would be plenty of time to work a few more years and save a bit more money, but now it looks like we will

never make it.” And they didn’t. “What we were going to do,” summarizes some of the saddest stories you will ever hear.

Assuming that you agree with me, that even for the brightest and best of us, things unaccountably, (by that I mean that no one in heaven or on earth is to blame for them) things do not turn out the way you thought they would, what do you say next?

Assume for the sake of argument that life is not fair, or as Ecclesiastes says bluntly, that all goes round and round and in the end it returns to where it started. What has already been will be coming round again. The river runs on to the sea. So what are you going to do about it? If life knocks you down or even just shakes you up a little or disappoints you, what are you going to do about it? Let’s look quickly at some options:

One option is that you can lie there and give up. This is an option that too many of us choose. I see it every day and have for decades. Once bitten, twice shy. “I can’t do anything,” I heard a young man say 35 years ago, and he never did. A tough world it is. The battle is on. So I will just avoid it all rather than be hurt again. I’ll curl up inside myself and let the world go by. I will take a 20-year Rip Van Winkle snooze and miss the worst of it.

My family has heard me tell the story of the young man in Britain who was present in the auditorium at Oxford when Archbishop William Temple was addressing the students. In the question period that followed, one student called out to the Archbishop. “But Sir, I cannot believe that life is worthwhile. It seems like a joke to me. Do you think that life is worth living?”

Dr. Temple did not even hesitate to clear his throat. He replied quietly, “If life is not worth living, what on earth else are you going to do with it?”

The second option is to get up all right, brush yourself off a little and then complain about it for the rest of your days. Go out and buy a house on Grumble Street. Stop your joy at the time of your troubles and share them with everybody you meet as often as you can, until the end of time.

I saw a sign on the wall at Mariner's Cove Grill in Brielle, NJ, when I went out for a quiet breakfast one morning. It hangs on the west wall at the other end from the counter. On the sign is painted a cute little red lobster, looking across the sign at a not-so-cute little crab. In the middle it reads, "Me and my old crab live here." I will give you the address if you want to write for one yourself.

I used to have a dear friend in Palm Beach named Madge Yoakley, a dyed-in-the-wool Baptist. She taught a weekly Bible class for me at our Chapel for years. Each morning when I greeted Madge with, "Well, my dear, how are you this morning?" She would respond, "I am wonderfully blessed." Even after her husband died and her own health began to go downhill, still she said the same.

Recently, when I learned that she had been bedridden for months. I called and asked, "How are you today, Madge?" She replied, "Dr. Cromie, I am wonderfully blessed". Since I first wrote this sermon, Madge has died and gone to heaven. Now she can truly say, "I am wonderfully blessed." You see, you may not be in charge of your predicament, but you are in charge of how you respond to it and what you decide to do about it.

The third option is that after you do something about it, you get up and keep on going! Nathaniel Hawthorne lost his job in the excise office one day and went

home dejected. As most people who lose their jobs, he felt rejected and useless, and he was worried for himself and for the future of his family.

But his wife knew better. She quietly put paper, pen and ink before him, gave him a kiss and a wink, and told him to start writing. That was what he really wanted to do anyway. And before long, he was renowned as a man of literature.

One of the greatest preachers I ever knew told me one day that as a young teen, he felt sure God was calling him to be a Major League baseball pitcher. He was certain of it, absolutely certain. But then he continued, “When the first seven batters I pitched to in Class D baseball down in Waco, Texas, hit home runs off of my pitches, I concluded that the Lord God was trying to lead me somewhere else.” And He did.

And it occurs not only with the rich and the famous, and those who are successful. It also occurs with myriads of unsung heroes of the faith, who turn tragedies into triumphs every day of their lives.

Once in a while, someone tells me they wish someone had told them how quickly life would pass. They say they feel cheated because they did not know. No one ever warned them. If only, if only, if only, if only, if only. Or, I wish, I wish, I wish, I wish, I wish.... If I had only known, I could have done so much more; I could have been a better husband, or a better child or a better friend or a better Christian.

Now, I do not want any one of you to say, “Why didn’t someone warn me?” I am warning you now. The anchors of our lives must be set against the wind if we intend to be strong, worthy and imperturbable. I used to warn young couples in their wedding ceremonies to be careful, for they would turn around twice and they would be 64. I said that during the wedding ceremony for our middle daughter, when I was 64. My father-in-law, Melvin, later quipped that I also should be careful, for you turn around again and you are 89.

Yes, we need anchors in our lives. The first one is Jesus Christ. Without a commitment to Him, nothing else I say or recommend will really matter. Our Lord is the anchor and the Anchor Man of all you do and all you ever seek to be. Once this commitment is made, you can go on to some other helpful things:

For example, go easy as you go. Most of us rush along so fast; we do not stop to rest and smell the roses. The stress we generate is not useful and not worth the effort. Anyway, you will survive and succeed better if you slow it down. Like Arnold Palmer used to say, “If you come to the 16th tee and you feel tired, swing slowly.”

A second piece of advice is, do not let the joy of living wait.

A third is, learn to age with grace and dignity. This will make it easier for you and everyone around you. Take an interest in other people. Work hard at finishing your attitude to life. Igor Stravinsky was once asked what the most exciting thing about being a composer was, and he responded, “When the piece is finished. After I have spent three solid hours looking for a single note, and I find it, it is a solemn, joyous moment.”

Some of the most penetrating writing of the Roman Empire came from the pen of Cicero. He wrote *de Senectute*, a famous book on growing older. “Each part of life has its own pleasures. Each has its own abundant harvest. We may grow old in body, but we need never grow old in mind and spirit. We must make a stand against old age. We must atone for its faults by activity. We must exercise the mind as we exercise the body. Life may be short, but it is long enough to live honorable and well. Old age is the consummation of life, rich in blessings,” he said.

And to this the Bible says, “Amen.” Jesus Christ never had the privilege of growing older. He gave his life for us when he was 33 years old. But still, as Paul writes, “In Him, all things are new.”

Finally, I remind you that the Bible says you must be born again. The privilege of being born again is not assigned to any age. I like to add that we must be born again and again and again,. Each new passage requires a re-commitment. Each time you take a good look at yourself, you are turning around again.

Nicodemus was old when Jesus told him to be born again. He asked, “How can a man be born when he is old?” Jesus answered, “How? By unfolding your self-centered life for the joy of others, by turning it over to the Lord; that is how. By allowing a perpetual newness and freshness to permeate all your think and all you choose to become.”

And why? Because otherwise you will fold in on yourself and smother your spirit and suffocate your possibility of joy. Let the Lord Jesus Christ be in charge of your life. He promised that He will carry you, and He keeps his promises. He will hold on to you and protect you and guide and guard and keep you though all your days, and in all the days to come, which is to say: For now and forever more.

Amen