

LET THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATION OF MY HEART BE ACCEPTABLE IN YOUR SIGHT, O LORD, MY STRENGTH AND MY REDEEMER.

Steven Covey, in “7 Habits for Highly Effective People”, tells the story of a man who was riding a bus and was greatly disturbed at a young boy who was running up and down the aisle screaming and laughing at the top of his lungs while the young boy’s Dad just sat idly by. The man could not believe that someone would be so rude and inconsiderate of the other people around him. He then began to notice other unflattering things about the man. His hair was unkempt so he was probably homeless, and his eyes were bloodshot, so he had to be an alcoholic. Finally not able to take any more of the child, he approached the dad and demanded that he get control of his young son.

The dad, seeming to be shaken from a trance, apologized to the man and told him that the boy’s mom, his wife, had just died at the hospital after struggling all night and he was trying to think of a way to break the news to the boy.

Timing. Discernment. When to tell or when not to tell. The difference between good timing and bad timing is razor thin. Or the adage that I hear often and use often is that “life can turn on a dime”. These are our meager attempts to try to explain the unexplainable glitches in our life or questions that lack answers and try to make some sense of it all.

The Gospel reading today is another story about timing. Jesus tells us from the outset that we need to be aware of our surroundings and be prepared for the possibility that people will not react to us positively and not have our best interest at heart. But the psalmist reminds us that “our God is our God forever and ever and He will be our guide forever.” It is all about “discernment” and noticing where our feet have placed us and where our feet have taken us.

Last year, our book group read and discussed Henri Nouwen’s *Discernment*. This is what he says about “timing”: “God’s time has to do with opportunity and fullness of meaning, moments that are ripe for their intended purpose. When we see time in light of our faith in the God of history, we see that the events of this year are not just a series of happy or unhappy events but part of the shaping hands of God, who wants to mold our world and our lives. Even when life seems harried and continues to have hard moments, we can believe that something good is happening amid all of this. We get glimpses of how God might be working out his purposes in our days.”

For you see, it’s about being able to understand and acknowledge the “place” that we find ourselves. As the writer of Ecclesiastes phrases it: discern the time to cry and the time to laugh; the time to gain and the time to lose; the time to keep silence and the time to speak; the time to keep and the time to throw away. A time to consider where our treasure and heart genuinely resides. As we heard in 2 Corinthians, a time “to be content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, for whenever I am weak, I am strong.”

In the ‘80’s and ‘90’s, in those hectic and chaotic days at the mental health center in Savannah, I was practicing the antithesis of what Henri Nouwen was talking about. I felt like I had to be busy; I had to run around and try to fix things even if they were unfixable and even if no one really cared whether they were fixed or not. And it just about “did me in”. It was not unusual for me to be angry with others

when I felt like they were not working as hard as I was or demonstrating the same frenetic energy. But I came to learn though that there is a time to be busy and a time to “stop” and smell the coffee. Or, better yet, “stop” and see God working out His purpose in me and for me. Or, as Frederick Buechner reminds us, to stop and listen to our lives.

Frederick Buechner reminds us that all moments are key moments. “Taking your children to school. Kissing your spouse goodbye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day’s work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly....If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say, it would be something like this. Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments and life itself is grace.”

Jesus is trying to tell us that there comes a time to listen to our lives before it is too late. To be patient with ourselves. To appreciate that wherever our journey may take us, God is in our midst. Again, Henri Nouwen reminds us that “if we are patient, we can look at all the events of each day – expected and unexpected – as holding promise for us. Patience is the attitude that says that we cannot force life, but have to let it grow in its own time.”

It is about pacing and timing. I later learned that it is OK to miss meetings, cancel appointments, to “stop” and be still. And I found that there is a time to lose myself in spending time with family and friends or cooking or building model planes or reading or meditating. And like the father and husband on that city bus, it is very “OK” to wait for the right moment to speak. God will let us know.

C.S. Lewis, in Mere Christianity, says this. He says: “It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day.”¹

He goes on to remind us that “many of us in the modern world are doing more than we should and are leading busy, hectic lives. We are often too busy to give daily attention to God and to the nurture of our souls. Preoccupied with what is seen, we lose touch with what is unseen. The world and its loud, insistent demands drowns out the quiet gentle voice of God’s Spirit in our lives.”

May we, in the midst of the distractions and calamities of the world, step back and for a moment, listen to the quiet gentle voice of God in our everyday lives. Benedict of Nursia founded a monastic order that sought to find that same balance between work and the contemplative life. He offers this prayer. Let us pray.

Father, in your goodness, grant us the intellect to comprehend you, the perception to discern you, and the reason to appreciate you. In your kindness, endow us with the diligence to look for you, the wisdom to discover you, and the spirit to apprehend you. In your graciousness, bestow on us a heart to contemplate you, ears to hear you, eyes to see you, and a tongue to speak of you. In your mercy, confer on us a conversation pleasing to you, the patience to wait for you, and the perseverance to long for you. Grant us the perfect end – your holy presence.

Amen