

GIVING TIME TO THE THINGS WE LOVE

This is the first of three messages about the three Ts of Stewardship – Time, Talent and Treasure. These are foundational to our membership of this church and also reflect our commitment to the wider mission as followers of Jesus.

When the congregation called me as full-time pastor, we made a covenant of ministry: I would give of my time and talent, and you would give of your treasure to facilitate this. I also covenanted to invest in the talent of the congregation members, so that together we might take MCC London forward to a new place.

We have lots of hopes for the future, but the foundation of those hopes rests in this three-fold commitment:

- 1) **TIME** to be physically present or active
- 2) **TALENT** to use our natural abilities, our learned skills and our spiritual gifts for the building up of the church.
- 3) **TREASURE** to share with God and others the the the things we are blessed with in life.

Today I'd like to think about our **TIME**.

When I was in Bible College, several students had problems with early rising. They would often arrive in assembly midway through or miss it all together. Aware of this, the Principal gathered the students together and reprimanded them with a lecture on tardiness and late rising.

The next morning, the same students were late again; and the Principal challenged them for disregarding this warning, "Didn't I tell you the bed was the enemy". They responded, "Jesus said that we should love our enemy".

The Bible is filled with references to time; the old testament prophets and priests were governed by what were called times of oblation – three times a day they stopped whatever they were doing to pray and worship God. The followers of Christ lived with an urgency that time may be short, believing they lived in the eleventh hour and that God's judgment would be in their lifetime.

Yet, time is the one thing that God has plenty of – the bounds of God are beyond time – infinite. Our greatest obstacle in understanding God is that we are anchored in time – we exist (at least physically) within a very narrow time slot. Whereas "with God a day is as a thousand years."

As we think about today's gospel reading we focus in on Jesus' discussion on priorities. Further on in his discussion, he says of himself "The Son of Man comes not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). He introduces the idea that life is not about what we can get but about what we can give; and our lives have value not based on what we accumulate but on what we sacrifice. As such he set in place the principle of stewardship.

This gives his sayings and actions (in today's reading) relevance, when he says "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." "Whoever welcomes one such child welcomes me." It is a reversal of the social norms. He's not talking about competition, such as winning a race; rather he talking about ego, about those who consider themselves better because of their position or possessions. You may notice in Biblical writings (e.g. the feeding of the five thousand in Matt 14:21, Mark 6:44) men are counted and then the phrase "and women and children beside" added. The implication was that women and children didn't count. So by focusing on children, Jesus was taking someone who the social and cultural strata didn't count and making them central to his message and to how people received him.

When we think about our own priorities, our lives usually focus around what we love and how we can best provide for that. For example, many of us work to earn money – not because we particularly love the job, but because we love our families, we love cruises, we love nice clothes and somehow we have to get the money to provide for them. As our wealth increases we often become less inclined to do certain jobs, and because we no longer have a slave or servant system we give those jobs to immigrants who will work for low wages and no benefits.

So, to us, Jesus says, the person willing to take on those jobs – without needing to – those are the ones who get greatest recognition by God.

The first principle of stewardship has nothing to do with money or ability, but simply about how we spend our time.

- a) Some of us work too much. God has set in order a sabbath – a day of rest established long before religion got hold of it and abused it. Our sabbath is the day when we rest from the daily routine we identify as work. If you're a homemaker then it's the a day free of household chores and responsibility; if you're a pastor it's a day when you take a break from all things church related; if you're unemployed it's a day when you don't have to look for work. If you're unable to work through health or retirement it is a day that you set aside as different to your weekly routine. And on this day you look after your own well being – spiritual and physical.
- b) Giving time to God. We confuse giving time to God with the Sabbath. In the early Christian Movement, the followers of Jesus gave their entire time to God. Regardless of where they were or what they were doing it was dedicated to God. Most of us have allowed that to slip because we've come to identify God's time as church time; and church time is usually Sunday.
 - i) For the church to be a community the gathering together is of prime importance. I know we talk about online communities, but that is misleading in that we're merely part of a list-serve. Community means people in communion with each other – not communion in a ritual way, but in a way that is equally sacramental. It is the giving of ourselves to each other for encouragement, bonding, growth, but primarily strength of witness and action. If we are to revitalize as a community we have to look at ways in which we can gather together and make it a priority. It maybe through Sunday worship, through small groups, through social action projects, but it has to more than showing up when it suits us.

ii) Our stewardship of time is more than what we do on Sunday; it is about how we relate to God the rest of our week. If coming to church is the only time we get together with God, then it's like going to the doctor or dentist for a check up. We need to find ways in which we can connect to God each day, and to do so we need to set aside time.

- it could be the traditional way of prayer and Bible study.
- it could be meditation.
- it could be spending time with someone who needs you – your family, a neighbour, someone who is sick or homebound.
- it could be volunteering with a program that assists the under-privileged, homeless or mentally ill.

Mark makes an interesting observation (v.34) that “they (the disciples) were silent”. It was their response to Jesus’ question about what they were doing. In fact, they’d been very noisy, arguing about which of them was the greatest, who had attended the most meetings, who had helped Jesus the most, who had the best position in the community; yet they realized it was all about them. When it came to what they were doing for others; the people Jesus was concerned for – they had nothing to say, they were silent.

Jesus goes on to say, when you welcome someone who you don’t know, someone who has no importance, someone who isn’t a mover and shaker then you welcome me. And when you welcome me you welcome God.

Who’d have guessed that greeting was the most important ministry in the church.