

IT'S ABOUT TIME

Texts on Sunday, August 8, 2017

Ecclesiastes 12: 1-8; Matthew 6: 24-34

Fifty years ago this summer, I made a month-long solo trek around New England on a three-speed bicycle. Soon thereafter, I got into lighter, faster bikes and through my twenties, I became a strong rider. Not so much now, no surprise, but last month, I had a chance to take the road bike up into the hills overlooking the Hudson Valley. It was hard. It brought to mind a discovery of a spiritual kind from hard rides in the days of my youth.

I bought my first road bike from an experienced rider. I bought hard soled shoes and nailed cleats into them and rolled out into the foothills of the Catskills with the rider who'd sold me the bike. I remember the very stretch of road where he declared, "Oh, man, I love the climbs, more than anything!" I thought he was messing with me. I had already been riding for years, but who could love that struggle up the hills? I thought they were the price of a good ride, not the pleasure.

In those days, I rode nearly every day; a fast hour on workdays, 80 or 100 miles on a weekend morning, always aiming for the stiff climbs. I bought topographic maps covering 5000 square miles around so I might search out the steepest grades. If you have thrown yourself into a tough physical regimen, you know how this goes. Pressing against the elements under the maximum force of your will, fire burns in the muscles, hot, painful, unsustainable, and thrilling; then a release—as they hit the stopwatch, as you let go the wrestler or grab the pool wall or crest the mountain. Scientists have studied and named all that's happening inside, but their words are just the notes on the page to the music of the racing body. Before winter closed on that first year with my road bike, I too loved the climbs, more than anything.

In those days of my youth, I was also reading *Seven Gothic Tales* by Karen Blixen, the incomparable Danish storyteller. In one of them, a character observes that there exist only three forms of true happiness. One, the cessation of pain. Two, the experience of an excess of strength. Three, the certainty that you are doing the will of God.

I cannot overstate how firmly this insight grasped me then, a love at first sight for the intellect. It mapped perfectly to aspects of my experience of the hard climbs in the mountains: that joy when clapping eyes on a gray pavement tipping steeply up into the trees, knowing what it will demand. Then the low gear and the test—together, the experience of an excess of strength. True happiness.

Then the streams of pain searing through the thighs, huge gulps of air tinged by the smells of hot asphalt and mown hay in the meadow. Then the hill finally giving up its height, then the release, and then pure, intense, true happiness—in the cessation of pain.

Now, in those days, that strong young man I became also yearned to know what his life was for. He worked in a shop, but he wanted work with a purpose fitted to his heart and soul, his mind and strength. This he could not find. He had no sense of God's will for him, no certainty of it whatever, and that lack wormed into him as his basic unhappiness. Karen Blixen had it right: there are only three forms of true happiness. He knew it, because he lacked absolutely in one of the three.

Through forty years, I have meditated on Blixen's true happinesses. Much more than sports analogies await here, as you already see. Whenever we face a challenge—some kind of opponent—our imagination instantly delivers an assessment of our own resources. Can I meet it? Often, we fear not. On that 3-speed bike tour fifty years ago, when I felt only dread at the sight of the New England hills rising before me, its character was this anxious imagination of having not the strength for the test.

Such a great part of our misery consists of this, that our imagination of what is coming—the particular thoughts we give in to and lose our time to—overwhelms our sense of our capacity to endure it. We drag a big picture of the future—one we make!—right into the living space of our life and mind, where we gasp at it in miserable anxiousness or anger or fear. Oh, for the sweet confidence we might have from an experience of an excess of strength!

Looking to what is past, we are often equally absorbed in vain imaginations. As a pastor for the people, and as a person with his past, I long ago noticed how great a part of our misery consists of this, that we believe that some matters which lie back there in time are not lying down at all, but, we fear, will sooner or later burst back into our life and hurt us or others. Feelings of guilt, to consider but one example, have always the character of fear that a pain from our past is chained to our future, and we are not free. Oh, for the happiness when—if—there might come cessation from pain at last.

These forms of happiness are “true” because they take the form of time, the element in which our thought swims. It's about time. Feeling an excess of strength is the blessing toward the future, certain that it will not overwhelm you. Cessation from pain is the blessing toward the past, certain that it will not rise to harm you. Certainty that you are doing the will of God is the blessing toward the present, the blessing of being present to what is real, what is here now, who is here now, no more obsessed with fearful imaginations of what is coming and what is past, but present, grateful, ready.

It's about time. Each time we are together, we pray in time. Our Father in heaven, forgive us our sin: give cessation from pain in the past. Our Father, deliver us from evil: give abundance of strength for what must come. Our Father, give us this day our bread for this day: give confidence that we can stay present to what is real, to your will, neither wishing nor wasting our energies on things that are not, but rather, to be here this day, ready for your word, O bread of life. It's about time. The whole of religion and God and prayer and hope and justice and love and truth and peace at the last—it's all about time, how we live it, or how we have yet to learn to live it.

Now, it is usual in preaching the gospel to turn to the scriptures of the day and let them reveal the light on a matter. We could do that. It would take only another hour or so. Yet the readings today were chosen for their simple, direction that life well lived is about right relationship to time. We read from the last words of Ecclesiastes exactly because they are not so familiar as are the words "to everything, there is a season; a time to be born, a time to die . . ." But the whole book is about time. From this last chapter, how surely, how confidently the poet faces the day when "the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it." Is this not the gift of an abundance of strength, of true happiness on the mountain wall we all must climb?

And you hardly need a clever analysis to probe Jesus' saying, "Therefore do not worry after what you will eat or what you will wear. For your Father in heaven knows that you need these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God." Perhaps all you need is to release yourself from fearing that the kingdom of God exists in a rarefied plane of being meant for good people not like yourself, difficult to access. Drop all that. The kingdom of God—it's about time. Not time yet to come, not time to be denied you because you've lived the life you've lived. No, to seek the kingdom of God is to come into the present, whenever you ask, free of the burdens of the past, filled with attention for what is here and for who is here, now.

Twice a month for about ten years, I drove out with two or three others to the prison at Attica for an open-ended conversation with a dozen men inside. Its aim was self-awareness, for any and all of us. You could say its aim was to seek the kingdom of God, but we never talked religion there.

A man we'll call "B"—who had been inside for a quarter century—had a unique gift for the right question at the right time. One morning, one of us volunteers, a retired physician, was telling the group about a fight he had had with his wife as they opened their lakeside cottage. B interrupted him. "Doc," he said, "when are you gonna get over it?" In surprise, the doctor seemed not to grasp the question. B pressed him. "Look, man, you're seventy and something. When are you going to stop this old struggle and face the real thing before you?" There followed a lovely, urgent, compassionate conversation—a

certain doing of the divine will, a form of true happiness, a space where heaven and earth touched.

Here is the thing. Your religion is not meant to be a set of comforting ideas, like a handsome china set come down through your ancestors. No, it's about time; always and only, your religion is about your practice in relationship to time, your awakening. Not once for all, but as often as you open to it, as often as you are called to remember who you are, and what you are for. Yes: you, there in the summer's breeze with the sun on your arm, suddenly, gratefully, absolutely awake to the Eternal, to the irreducible, inextinguishable flame that burns within you, a pure grace, a life insusceptible to diminishment or death, though the body will be diminished and die. You, now, eternal in the heavens, ready.

"So do not worry about tomorrow; it will bring worries of its own." It's about time.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

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