

Lent 2: Our Time

Fasting from Overscheduling & Busyness

Feasting on Unstructured Time & Solitude

Luke 10:38-42

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

As we look ahead to week two of Whole40, we shift focus from the habits and practices by which we care for our body, to questions about time. *How do you inhabit time?*

Many of you have too little time. Your days are full of demands. Some of you have these vast color-coded calendars with work responsibilities, kids' activities, and meal plans. We make these calendars because they promise a feeling of control. But do we control the calendar, or does the calendar control us?

My colleague, Rev. Anna Traynam is the pastor at Shallowford Presbyterian. She told me a story. Last year's Presbyterian Women's Bible Study was about Sabbath. Anna said the younger women in the congregation loved it; they devoured it. They were so hungry for Sabbath--for an understanding of time that required them to take a break. Anna said something else happened. A group of retired women picked up the same Sabbath curriculum. And by the third meeting, they were all in agreement, "this is boring. We don't see the point." They had more than enough time. Maybe too much.

We can have such different relationships to time. Some of you are desperate for more. Others of you have more than you need. I wonder, could time somehow be... shared? Before we get to that, let's talk about time itself. What is "time?"

Time is a rhythm hardwired into Creation. The first human calendars were based on our practice of watching the regular 28-day cycles of the moon.

Only later did we decide that the sun might be used to mark time.

The Romans invented a solar calendar. The earth moves around the sun once every 365.24 days. This calendar is still in use. But it's shifty. We have to fidget with it to get it right, with things like "leap year."

We human beings don't just mark the days of the year, we divide up the time every day. Our earth spins on its axis. We can measure that. Our human ancestors marked the hours by watching shadows creep around a sundial. Which meant they didn't keep time at night. Maybe night is for... sleeping?

By the 1200s, we were making clocks. They were big and unwieldy--but they still only marked hours, not seconds.

It wasn't until the 1700s that people began to have watches to keep us each personally chained to time.

Now, we look at clocks dozens, maybe hundreds, of times a day. We human beings are focused on time and time moves faster than it did for any people who have ever lived. The word "moment" used to mean 90 seconds. Now, a moment is the blink of an eye. Even as time measurement gets more precise, time itself remains notoriously slippery. Time is always shifting under our gaze. Time changes as we change. Consider the old adage about raising children: each day lasts forever, but the years go by too fast.

Because time is always subject to your perception, we ought to talk about what time "means" to us. In this culture, time's value comes from economics--specifically, the pressure to be relentlessly, competitively, soul-crushingly "productive." Most of us have internalized the idea. Got time? I ought to work on some important project. I ought to go exercise. I ought to at least read a book. What about prayer? Well... is it "useful?" In the hands of capitalism, time becomes just another scarce resource to be extracted, used, colonized, burned over.

Cultural values shape our emotions about time. We can have strong emotions around time--depending on whether we think time is being used "well" or "poorly." Whenever I'm late, it feels like a moral failing; if my kids look like they're "wasting time" I get angry. If I step back, I wonder, "is this good?" Who benefits from this way of valuing time? Who gets to decide what time means, or how it makes us feel?

I remember the first time I discovered that there are other ways of thinking about time. My congregation in New York had a partnership with congregations in Soweto, South Africa. I got to travel several times to work with our partners there. The first time I went, someone mentioned "Africa time." I needed to be aware that the partners I was meeting with would not always be "on time." Timeliness, I was told, as a value, was a "white people thing." Not every person on this planet is held captive by the idea that every minute must be "productive." In South Africa, my experience was that some meetings started on time; others did not. It was also my experience that I've never been in a place where I received such extraordinary hospitality. Which cultural values matter? Who gets to decide?

Time is not fixed. It is flexible. Nor is its meaning fixed. So we should also ask, in this place, is there a "theology of time" that can help us resist its capitalist colonization?

I think there is. The first thing we might say is that time, like Creation, belongs to God. We see this in Genesis. Time is inherent in the order of Creation. The separation of day and night. The seven day week. But the most important theological concept of all when it comes to time is the Sabbath.

God sets one day a week above the other six. This day is for rest, but not just rest: rest is part of the pure delight of the Sabbath day. Work stops so that all Creation can enjoy everything that God has made. The Sabbath is for plants and animals and humans. The Sabbath is for eating and drinking. For play. For worship. For sex. For rest. It's for all people, the poor and the rich; it's about embodying the justice and right relationships that God sets in the order of Creation. Sabbath says, "your effort adds nothing to the goodness that God has made already." Every Sabbath is your invitation to dwell in the fullness of Creation in time.

I get it. Your Sabbath days don't feel like that. We've let the market take over Sabbath. Our weekends are jam-packed. We don't let each other rest. We don't let the earth rest. But we should. God says one day a week you are to live as though time itself is fulfilled and there is nothing to do but delight.

This is not just Genesis. It's also Jesus. Jesus, as I read him, wanted you to understand time not as an instrumental means to a future end, but Jesus told us to enjoy time right now. When Jesus walks around and teaches people about God, he says, "the Kingdom of God is at hand." What this means is that the rule of God is here spatially and temporally. Of course, when Jesus declared this, the Romans were still very much "in charge." But Jesus was saying "look deeper." What's happening around me? People are being healed, people are being fed, people are being brought in to caring community. Justice is being restored. When you hang out with Jesus, it feels as though the reign of God is happening now. God's future of love and just is always breaking in to the present moment.

In Jesus, the Sabbath, the fullness of time, is now.

The little story from Luke shows us a glimpse of what this looks like for us, to live in the fullness of God's time. On its face, the story is a little wonky. Jesus goes to house and encounters two women. Mary, is attentively sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him. Martha, channeling every mother I know, is "distracted by her many tasks." There looks to be a dichotomy--serenity against distractedness, contemplation against action, even of a male-privileged world of "serious religion" against a female-dominated domestic sphere. Martha pleads with Jesus, "shouldn't Mary be helping me?" And Jesus dismissively says, "Mary's getting it right." Every woman I know resents Jesus for this response. Women are unjustly saddled with all the domestic work and the emotional labor. It feels like Jesus is scolding Martha for doing what her culture requires her to do. One wonderful feminist said about this passage, "Maybe Jesus could have shut up and got up to help Martha--or better yet, finished the housework with one of his miracles--so Mary and Martha could have sat and listened to him together!" I get it.

The best way to hear this story--the way it is intended in Luke and the way it has most often been interpreted in the history of the church is not as an "either/or" when it comes to which is more important, work or contemplation, but a "both/and." This story comes right after the story of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus says right action is the embodied expression of mercy. Even the work that Martha is doing here is, in the

Greek, “diakonia,” the essential and holy service of caring for the needs of others. Jesus is not diminishing the works of mercy; he’s opening space for everyone to share, too, in the contemplation, the solitude, and the quiet that bring us life.

The fullness of time is not a crowded schedule. The fullness of time is not maximizing productivity. The fullness of time is a rhythm. It is a full day, and a quiet night. It is a week of work, and a day of pure delight. It is works of mercy and quiet contemplation. Mary and Martha are not two people. They are two sides of the same soul, searching for wholeness, searching for an experience of the fullness of time.