

Time Flies

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

January 1, 2012

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” These are the haunting words of Ecclesiastes. These are the words that I find myself turning to at the end of every year.

There are two hard truths in what the writer is telling us. We might as well get them out on the table. First, “For everything there is a season...” For quite a while now I’ve mentioned from this pulpit that the answer to life is “D...All of the above.” We don’t get to pick and choose from the smorgasbord that is this life. Sure...choices we make can lead us to have tougher experiences just as choices we make can sometimes lighten the load. Sooner or later, though, life catches up to us. We are forced to go where we don’t want to go and do what we would really rather not do. Even before that happens though, we watch the lives of others and accumulate the list of life experiences we don’t want to have. We do everything in our power to avoid those moments. And, because our powers in life aren’t nearly what we think they are, because we’ve spent so much time avoiding things, when they become unavoidable, when they catch up, they are usually worse than they otherwise might have been. Maybe the deciding factor though when the hard days come is how long will we stand there arguing with life, yelling, “This cannot be happening!” How long before we begin dealing with what is real?

The second hard truth of our text is that life is full of seasons. Now, no one should understand the implications of this truth better than a bunch of Chicagoans! You know the old quote: “Don’t like the weather in Chicago? Wait five minutes...It’ll change!” Think

about our seasons. Spring in Chicago typically lasts for about day. The day before, it is 38 degrees. The day after, it is 85. For one day, all the bulbs proudly bloom. For one day, the collective I.Q. of the population drops by 30 percent and we all just sit down outside. For most of the summer, the temperature fluctuates anywhere between 50 degrees and 100 degrees. (Seriously...I remember the year we went home from the 4th of July parade and had a fire in the fireplace because we were so cold!) Fall, my favorite season, is beautiful and sometimes lasts a long time but even then is never without the threat of ending at any moment. And then, of course, there is winter: gray and freezing; gray and thawing; gray and freezing all over again, with an occasional blizzard for good measure. The seasons come and go.

Ecclesiastes tells us that's how life is. On the one hand, this can be good news if you don't like the "season" in life that you are in: hang on and it will change. As the locker room poster said in high school: "Tough times don't last; Tough people do." On the other hand, if things are good, if you are happy with the way things are right now in your life, well...despite your best efforts, this "season" will change, too. Everything must change, not because you failed in some way to prevent that change, not because God has it "in" for you, but simply because change is a built in feature to this life.

We would love to think that somehow we can pick and choose what we'll have to go through in life. We would love to think that once we get things to where we would like them to be that we can just keep them that way. However, the writer of Ecclesiastes shakes his head and whispers, "Good luck with that!" Good luck trying to manage and control and manipulate the people and the world around you. Good luck trying to keep change from happening when you're happy with things. (As my six year old godson, Joey,

said to me this summer, “You know, if dogs just stayed puppies, everyone would have a dog!”) Good luck trying to argue with life when it’s your turn to do something hard. Life isn’t fair. Life is life. Life is a roller-coaster and we have to learn how to ride the ride.

When we spend our days arguing with life about whether it is fair (“This shouldn’t be happening to me” or “Why do things have to change?” or whatever other argument we would like to have), we miss the chance that we have to live. It’s like we are in the middle of a great game and a controversial play happens. We are perfectly free to argue the call. However, the call isn’t going to change and in this game we call life, there is no way to stop the clock. Our lives have a beginning, which we celebrate mostly with less enthusiasm every year. They have a middle, which, because we have to guess about such things, gets pushed back every year. (“You know...60 is the new 40!) And they have an end, which most of us work hard not to think about. When something happens that we don’t like and we “bench” ourselves, when we refuse to participate because we don’t like what’s happening anymore, the clock keeps ticking. Time keeps on flying. In what we call “The Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus poses this question for his listeners, “And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to the span of your life?” He sounds a lot like Ecclesiastes, doesn’t he?

When I officiate at a wedding these days, there’s a pretty constant message that I am working to deliver. A marriage is the perfect example of the truths that Ecclesiastes tells. Before you’re married, you get to date. You “gear up” to be at your best and you plan special times. When you’re married, you go through everything together. You see each other at your best and worst and you see the best and worst of life, itself. My challenge to the couple who are about to be married is simple: “What it means to be married is to wake up every day grateful that you have someone to love who

happens to love you. Having been given that gift, ask yourself, “What does it mean to love this person today?” Is today the day that I need to speak the truth in love, even if it is the truth they don't want to hear? Is today the day that I need to defer my own needs? Is today the day when the loving thing to do is to be patient and kind? Because I am loved, no matter what else happens today, I want to be able to say, at the end of the day, that I did my best to love.

Although I really don't go there in a wedding (because, let's be honest, no one is at the wedding to hear what the pastor has to say!), everything that I am saying to them as a couple is in a broader sense the core of our faith. We have a God who loves us. God doesn't show that love for us by making sure that nothing bad or unwelcomed ever happens to us. God doesn't show that love for us by making sure that nothing ever changes. God shows that love for us by going through every day with us and by offering us the chance, no matter what is happening, to be loving people. God seems intent on our growth, not a growth in our ability to control and manipulate but in a growth in our ability to love. We wake each morning and ask ourselves, “What does it mean to be God's loving servant today? Who needs me? How can I help?”

My favorite story of the last year might help make the point. There was a comedian named Mike DeStefano who had a brief moment of near fame when he appeared on the “Last Comic Standing” series on NBC. Mike died at age 44 of a heart attack. He grew up tough in the Bronx. He had been addicted to heroin at an early age and had kicked that habit but not before contracting HIV. He was diagnosed at age 21. 23 years before his death, he was told that he had five years, tops, to live. In his addiction treatment program, he met a beautiful girl named Fran who was also HIV positive. They fell in love and moved to Florida. Mike said that they

were like an elderly couple who moved there to enjoy the sun for their final days.

Fran got much sicker than Mike. She had pneumonia 15 different times. She was given her last rites several different times during various hospitalizations. She survived. It was brutal time, though, for both of them. Eventually, Fran ended up in hospice care, surrounded by a whole bunch of people who were dedicated to making her final days as comfortable and meaningful as they could make them.

One day, in the middle of this brutal time, Mike bought a Harley-Davidson motorcycle. He rode it to the hospice facility. Fran took one look at it and got completely angry and stalked away. Mike was totally confused. He turned to the hospice worker and asked, “Why is she so mad at me?” The worker said, “Well, she just feels like you’re moving on with your life, and you don’t love her anymore, like you have this motorcycle, and you don’t need her anymore.”

Mike realized how much he did need her, how much he loved her, that in fact she was his best friend. So, what he did was one of those couples things: he went home, grabbed a bunch of his work shirts and brought them back to Fran’s room. He looked her in the eye and said, “Franny...my shirts are a mess. I need you to iron them.” She got all mad but when he came back 20 minutes later his shirts were ironed and she was out of bed. She said to him, “Where’s the motorcycle?” Now, she was excited...

Fran went outside and sized up the motorcycle. First, she wanted to sit on it. Next, she wanted Mike to start it up. She was quite a sight: skin and bones in a paper dress, straddling a Harley and holding on to the morphine drip that was attached to the pole-

cart next to her. Fran looked at Mike and asked, “Can you just take me for a little ride around the parking lot?” Mike’s first thought was, “No way! You’ve got an i.v. pole and you’re going to burn your leg and I’m going to be the guy who killed my wife on a motorcycle before she could die of AIDS!” Mike said though, “Then, it just hit me; I’m like, ‘No...I have to!’” This was the moment. The loving thing to do was to take her for a ride. Franny squealed as they did laps around the parking lot, with Fran holding onto the i.v. cart and its four little tiny wheels just clanging away.

On one of the later laps, Mike and Fran passed the entrance to the hospice and he noticed something. “All these nurses are standing out front and they’re all crying. They’re watching us and they’re crying. And I don’t know why they were crying. I was like... “Why are they crying?” I didn’t know because I was just in it. I was living it. I knew my wife had suffered. She had been a heroin addict. This was her past and then she ends up with AIDS and she’s dying, and all she wants is a motorcycle ride.” The next thing Mike knew, they were on I-95, Franny's bony body behind him, paper gown and morphine bag flapping in the wind. Mike remembers whipping past cars and thinking, “What kind of life are you living? Look at me...I’m on top of the world here.”

Not long later, Fran died. Mike said the motorcycle ride was the best decision he ever made. The greatest thing he ever did was care for his wife: “I’m capable of deep love and commitment, you know?” Sometimes, the loving thing to do can even be to go for a very fast motorcycle ride.

“For everything, there is a season...” Now matter how hard the moment might be, our job is to be fully alive, completely aware and ready to love in whatever ways we can.