

*God of Grace, remind us that you have called us into the world.
Grant that we would hear that call and heed it. Amen.*

May 13, 2018 – Acts 1:6-11a

“Time’s A-Wastin’”

Many people assume my pastoral duties are pretty much done at the end of a worship service. They imagine that, if there are no after-worship activities, I’m free to go home and spend the rest of the afternoon napping on the sofa. They might be surprised to learn that the afternoon is actually spent in editing and uploading the sermon video, as well as a sound file and the sermon manuscript for our church’s website. And also I work on administrative and financial reports associated with that particular Sunday. And I round out the afternoon by producing the worship bulletin, PowerPoint, and readings for the next Sunday. It’s time consuming, most often lasting until 6:00 or 7:00 in the evening. But it’s also necessary, even though it may be a bit mundane and tedious.

But something I always enjoy on Sunday afternoons is reviewing the welcome cards that people leave with us. The prayer requests on the back of the cards guide my prayer intentions throughout the week, and if there is any information from newcomers on the front, it gives me an opportunity to connect with them.

But lately, I’ve begun noticing something on the cards that recently left me dumbfounded. As time goes by, even though I feel as young as when I first arrived at this church years ago, I find myself getting a reality check every time I see the birth date of a young newcomer.

It recently came to a head when I realized that one of our newcomers was only a year old when I arrived at this church 18 ½ years ago! “She was practically a newborn!” I screamed at Mark. This young lady had already lived out her childhood and adolescence in what seemed like the blink of an eye that I had been this church’s pastor!

Now, certainly the realization served to emphasize that age has snuck up on me without my ever being aware that it had been stalking me. But there was something else that troubled me. I couldn’t help but come to terms with the fact that very possibly more than two-thirds of my life is past. If I’m lucky, I have left on this earth about the same length of time, maybe a little more, as I have spent as this church’s pastor. That can be a sobering thought when you realize how very fast the last 18 ½ years have flown by.

It makes me realize that if I hope to die at peace with myself, if I hope to have the impact on the world that I would like to have, if I expect to accomplish the things that I believe God would have me do before dying, then I need to get busy because time’s a-wastin’.

One can’t help but imagine that Jesus experienced the same sense of urgency during his lifetime. The average lifespan of someone in the first century was 35-40 years of age. And that means by the time he went into ministry at the age of 30 years old, for all practical purposes, Jesus was an old man. When he entered ministry, he had to have realized that he didn’t have much longer on this earth – not only because of his life expectancy, but also because he would have known the Roman Empire wouldn’t tolerate his message of another kingdom – one that went by the name of the Kingdom of God.

And so for three short years, he healed the sick, preached hope to the masses, fed the hungry, ate with the marginalized, and embraced the outcast. Knowing full well that his days were numbered, he did all he could to further the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

And this morning’s passage picks up following his death and resurrection. He is just minutes away from leaving his disciples and ascending into the heavens. And so he must have gone cold with panic when they asked him if now was the time when Israel would finally be restored as a world power. He must have had a sick feeling deep within his stomach to think that these folks, who clearly were still missing the point of his ministry, were now going to be the ones to pick up the torch and carry it. It was their turn now. If the good news of God’s love for everyone was going to be spread to the world, it was going to be up to these clueless buffoons to do it.

So as clearly as he could, he spelled out that they should hold their horses until the Holy Spirit had come upon them. And after that, they were to take the message to “Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.” And with that, scripture tells us that he was lifted into the clouds and taken from their sight. And even as they continued to stare into the heavens, two heavenly messengers appeared and asked, “Why are you standing here looking up at the skies?” which I translate as “Get you head out of the clouds! Quit standing around! Time’s a-wastin’!”

And I believe there are messengers trying to tell us the same thing today, but we are unable – or more likely, unwilling – to see them or hear them. I think the message for the 21st century Church is that time’s a-wastin’, so quit standing around. It’s a message which almost always receives the same response from churchgoers: “I’m not gifted,” or “I’m still looking for God’s purpose in my life.” Which I interpret to mean “I want to do something magnificent that will make people sit up and take notice of me. And until I’m able to do that, I’ll just sit here and wait until the Holy Spirit gives me the go-ahead.”

Jesus fed the hungry. Just what spiritual gift are we waiting for in order to feed the hungry? Go to the local McDonald’s restaurant, buy some gift cards, carry them around in your car, and give one to the next person you see on the street corner asking for help. Time’s a-wastin’!

I know of someone who hardly ever comes to this church on Sunday mornings any more. But there are folks who know her, and they even occasionally write her name on our Welcome Card, where it asks who you have been missing. Well, my friends, while we’re trying to get her through the doors of this church, she is seeking out the homeless who make their beds under bridges, and handing out sandwiches she has made, along with socks and hygiene essentials. And when she hands them out, she spends some time talking to them, getting to know them and listening to their stories. She understands that time’s a-wastin’.

Now, please don’t misunderstand me. I’m not knocking church. I think there is value in gathering with others and developing relationships that support us in our times of spiritual need. I think it’s worth our while to worship God with others. And it’s good to contribute our finances to an institution which can do more than we are able to do individually.

But I also think there is value in responding to God’s call in our personal lives. There are no spiritual gifts necessary for making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. And you don’t have to wait on the Holy Spirit’s movement in your life to walk into a local McDonald’s and purchase a few \$5 gift cards.

And who knows? Your own life just might be transformed if you take the time to hear the story of someone who ended up homeless. You might be the one who receives the most blessing when you connect with another human being by feeding them. You might even experience a healing within your own spirit which you never realized was broken.

This is the sort of stuff Jesus went around doing. This is the sort of stuff he told his disciples to do before his grand exit. And this is the sort of stuff we have been told to do. But we need to quit expecting a religious institution to do the ministry that we are fully capable of doing ourselves.

There are people who are hungry. What are you going to do about it? There are marginalized people who are being run over by society – immigrants and refugees, trans folk, gays and lesbians, sexual assault victims, people of color. What are you going to do about it?

The disciples were confronted by two messengers dressed in white, who asked the question, “Why are you standing here looking up at the skies?” I think the message is the same even if the messengers aren’t dressed in white. Instead they are dressed in dirty bargain store T-shirts and they stink. Their skin comes in all colors: black, brown, and sunburnt. They have bruises on them that they don’t remember getting. And they are all asking the same question: “Why are you standing here looking up at the skies?” So how will you answer them? There’s a whole world out there that needs us, and we may not have much longer on this earth. So what are you waiting for? Time’s a-wastin’. Amen.