

The Waiting Game

Joel 2:21-27

Psalm 126

Matthew 6:24-34

Thanksgiving Sunday - October 11, 2009

Waiting. We all do it. I suspect, however, that not many of us like it.

As a commuter, I, like some of you, wait in traffic, for the bus or the subway. Many of us have waited for medical test results for ourselves or a loved one. All of us have sat in “waiting rooms” of various descriptions. Some of us have sat in vigil beside the bed of someone who is dying. Women wait while new life grows inside of them during pregnancy. Children, teens and young adults ‘wait’ to move on to different phases in their school career – kindergarten, high school, college or university. Farmers remain vigilant as crops ripen in a field. We have all stood in line – at the bank, at the grocery store, for an event.

Life provides many periods of waiting.

But, why is it so hard?

In her well written book, *Seven Spiritual Gifts of Waiting*, Holly Whitcomb reflects on this difficulty. She writes: ***“Waiting presents an enormous challenge. We are impatient I-can-fix-it kinds of people...but not all situations can be fixed. We assume that everything in life can be made better by taking action, but sometimes it just isn’t so. Waiting is an important guest to honour in the guest house of our humanity. If we consciously allow waiting to be our teacher, we can accommodate waiting more peacefully. If we welcome waiting as a spiritual discipline, waiting will present its spiritual gifts. It contains some of our richest spiritual opportunities if we are conscious enough and courageous enough to name them and live into them.”***

Whitcomb goes on to describe seven spiritual gifts of waiting: ***patience, loss of control, living in the present, compassion, gratitude, humility and trust in God.***

So, what if waiting became our teacher?

It was Jesuit Pierre Teilhart de Chardin who advised: ***“trust in the slow work of God”***. It seems to me for waiting to become our teacher, we must contemplate this ‘**slow work**’.

Farmers know all about this **slow work**. You simply cannot rush the ripening of grain or the birth of an animal – it will happen in due course. Around about the end of September, my father would begin testing the grain in the wheat field. It was golden brown – it looked ready to be harvested. Some might have been tempted to jump the gun and get the combine out. But, the true test for him was how it felt when he rolled it in his hand and then he would chew it in his mouth. He knew from feel and touch when it was ready. Patience, living in the moment, humility, trust in God – you have no choice, as a farmer, but to be guided by these. I learned a lot about all of them in rural southwestern Ontario.

This **slow work** was what the Israelites did during their long sojourn in the wilderness and what Christians must do during the Advent season.

For us, though, it is difficult to stop trying to control things and just relax into the grace of God – to see waiting as a blessing and not a curse. To look at waiting in this way is to go against the cultural grain. We have been programmed by society to believe that our desires can be fulfilled instantly. The pragmatism of our can-do philosophy exalts action over contemplation.

Closely connected to waiting is worry. Whitcomb continues with this thought:

‘The longer I live, the more I believe that worry is an utterly unprofitable and ineffective condition. Yet worry is a pervasive condition – especially when we are waiting for something important, such as a test result, a mortgage approval, a job decision, new about a loved one. The truth is, worry never teaches us anything, really. When we worry we disempower ourselves and lessen our trust in God.’

My own experience of worry is such that on the one hand I know that worry will not change one thing about a given situation or an outcome but, amid my very human nature, oh how it can keep you up at night. And, it can overwhelm us.

Recall words from our gospel passage today: ^{“27} **And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”** There is real wisdom here. Matthew goes on to say: **“strive first for the kingdom of God* and God’s righteousness and all these things (like clothing, food, and drink) will be given to you as well.”** He is inviting us to take our cue about how to live our lives from nature – watch the birds of the air and the lilies in the field. There, you will discover the **grace-filled slow work of God.**

So, let’s get back to this **slow work of God** and how this connects with **the spiritual gifts** that might be discovered amid **waiting.**

Two points of reflection come to mind:

The first is this: we **are living it out here at ESG.** We are in a waiting time – a wondering time – a searching time. As we wait for the right person to join us on our journey as Minister of Worship and them, we are being asked to do so in God’s time, not in our time. It is requiring patience, an acknowledgement that much of this process is out of our hands, a humility and ultimate trust in God that perhaps we weren’t expecting. We may have thought this process would be over and done with long ago. But, waiting has become our teacher here at ESG. I also think that we are gaining a renewed appreciation for one another and our congregation and the gifts that lie within it. I personally have experienced compassion, kindness and care and I have seen it shared throughout the congregation. And, for all of this, and more, I sit in deep gratitude for this waiting time and its gifts, for you, for my colleagues and our staff. Indeed, this has been a time of literally needing to fall into the grace of God.

The second point of reflection lies within each of us - think of a time of waiting in your life. Can you think about it as a time that held a gift? As long or as difficult or challenging as it may have been?

That same farmer father of mine who waited amid the rhythm of the farm, brought our family into another kind of waiting – at his bedside, as he prepared to die. I have often wondered since if the lessons we learned on the Kimball Road prepared us for this time in the life of our family. As we waited with him, we discovered new dimensions of patience and the meaning of time, as we tried to make the most of each moment. We experienced incredible compassion on the part of nurses and the hospital, which made it easy for us to be with him. I think we would all say it was a humbling time – when we simply had to rely on one another and a deep sense that God was companioning us through it. But, I think the greatest gift received in this experience – this **slow work** of God - was gratitude. My father was quiet, unassuming man – not always easy and hesitant in his expression of emotion and feelings. This time offered each of us, including him, moments to speak the words that needed to be spoken, offer the gestures that needed to be offered, to give and receive the forgiveness that we all yearned for. So, while we may have wished it to be over quickly, for everyone’s sake, especially his, this waiting time was, in the end, a blessing for all, a grace note, amid deep sadness. For this, I sit in deep gratitude.

So on this Thanksgiving Sunday, I am going to ask you to think about something rather unconventional.

Yes, we have much to be thankful for: family, friends, food, the bounty of the land, a home, church. And, it's important for us to pause and offer our gratefulness for all of this.

In addition to this, I would like for you to take the time to reflect on the **waiting times** in your life and view them through the **eyes of gratitude**, as well.

Are there or have there been gifts that have come to you in times of waiting? In the doctor's office? By the bedside? At our church?

Gratitude really is an attitude. It's more than saying thank you. It's heartfelt, deep appreciation. It's a way of life – a way of being. The day, and all that is experienced within it, is received as a gift, with its joys and challenges, in its fullness. Our response is how we choose to approach the day or our situation in life.

The reality is that life brings us to 'valleys', on occasion, in life. Does God intentionally lead us there, treating us like pawns on a chess board? No. Does God walk with us amid these times of challenge, these times of waiting, these times of wondering? Absolutely. This is the promise of our faith.

Every major religious group acknowledges and affirms, in its own way, that we are, at times, called into emptiness, called to walk into that sacred place of yearning so that we can know and experience the source of life itself within us and then moving through us for a reason or a purpose that is beyond our understanding.

And, this, can be described in no other way than a **place of grace**. And, it is there that we experience the **slow work** of God.

On this Thanksgiving Weekend, then, let us give thanks for the source of life itself and the blessing that is received through it.

Amen.