

Redeem the Time

Ephesians 5:15-20

October 29, 2023

When I was a kid in Pleasant Garden, North Carolina, Saturdays from early December all the way through mid-March were spent at the elementary school gymnasium. Picture one of those ancient gyms with creaky wooden floors, built-in bleachers, and absolutely no real estate between the baseline and an unforgiving concrete wall. The admission fee was two dollars, and for that, you could stay all day long. Often, I did. I played in my own basketball game. I watched my friends play. I watched my dad coach while my sister played. And, when I was finally twelve years old, I got my first paying job keeping the official scorebook for \$5 a game, paid in cash, straight out of the admission box. To say that it was my dream job would be an understatement. Since my professional goal at that time was to be drafted by the newly formed expansion Charlotte Hornets, I figured I was receiving helpful on-the-job training as well as good pay.

Now, keeping the scorebook for a recreational church basketball league in the early 1990s was an education in public relations, social psychology, behavior management, and conflict de-escalation. I'm talking about the parents. In other words, it was wonderful preparation for a life in ministry. The truth is, I loved it all. But mostly, I was there for the basketball.

Fast forward three decades—fall of 2021. Samuel, eight years old, had fallen in love with the game and taken up his father's goal of NBA stardom. He begged Sara and I to sign him up for a "real" team. And initially we resisted. The reason? Time. Too much of it. A weeknight practice and a Saturday game every single week for four months. Not to mention drop off and pick up at practice. Transportation to and from games. Getting home from work in time to

make it. Finally, though, we gave in, and we signed Sam up on the day after the registration deadline.

Fortunately, there was a grace period. But along with the registration confirmation there was the opportunity to volunteer. You could serve concessions, you could be the commissioner of the league, or you could coach. Sara and I set aside some time one night to discuss it, and we agreed that coaching sounded fun, but...time. We decided maybe we would do it the next year.

Then, the email came. Subject line all caps: URGENT NEED FOR COACHES. It turned out that the only league that lacked enough volunteer coaches was the second-grade boys' league. Sam's league.

So, Sara forwarded me the email with this message: "Is the Holy Spirit trying to tell us something?" After all, we knew that since he had registered after the deadline, Samuel had the most to lose if there weren't enough coaches that year. And so, we talked it over. We got out our calendars and started mapping the schedule. The concern again was time.

And so, we talked about time, and thanks to Sara's wisdom, we did not discuss the weekly schedule or the evening routine, but the passage of years. Each of us shared stories of how we still remember playing basketball as a kid, how our parents always showed up, how my father and Sara's mother coached our teams. And then we talked about how quickly these years are already passing and how we make time for what matters most. Together we responded to the email, and this afternoon, we'll begin our third year of coaching basketball. It's the best thing we do.

Now, why do I tell this story today? I'm glad you asked. This morning's scripture is a meditation on measuring time. Yes, it may read like a series of instructions from an apostle to a congregation, from a pastor, a preacher to his church. It is absolutely a warning against foolish living. But the passage is framed by language about time. The translation you just heard suggests that we are to make the most of the time. And that's fine, but in this case, older translations really capture it far better. I love the King James version: "Redeem the time..."

Redeem the time? Why? In short, because time is not neutral. It must be cared for, paid attention to, redeemed from meaninglessness. Redeem the time because its swift passage is evil. It steals from us. Be careful. Pay attention to how you use time.

You might know that there is a time that is not the same as the ticking seconds on a scoreboard. In the New Testament this is *kairos* time—that's the word used in Ephesians. *Kairos* is time infused with meaning—time on purpose. The passage of *kairos* time is how we measure what matters.

Ephesians is a letter, but it sounds like a song. It is poetry with a purpose, calling us to pursue what matters most. And so, gathered before God and each other, we ask, what does matter most?

Because of the work I do, I'm able to hear reflections on that question from many different people at many different stages of this journey through life. And what I want to report to you this morning is that there is a common theme, particularly among the wisest voices. What matters most—the best use of that *kairos* time—is relationship. Full stop. To redeem the time is to rescue it from the meaninglessness of isolation and loneliness and invest it in our connection to others.

Today, immersed in the majesty of music, we celebrate All Saints' Sunday. Today we remember and give thanks for those whose time on earth has come to an end, whose race is run, whose baptism is now complete.

Among the most poignant moments in ministry are the ones spent at the bedside of one who is dying. More often than not, we simply sit and hold hands in silence. Sometimes, we're able to have a conversation, and in those conversations, again and again, this is what I hear: what matters most are the people we love and the ones who love us. Wherever there is regret it is *never* because of too much time spent with loved ones, or too much effort reaching out to those in need, or too much commitment to cultivating a deeper relationship with God. No one wishes they had worked more. No one wishes they had driven themselves harder. Consistently, those conversations both bless and challenge me.

And then there are those moments when the ability to speak has passed but the need for connection goes on. On more than one occasion, I have witnessed this miracle: though no words can be spoken, hymns can still be sung. How when memory fades, music persists. When strength is gone, melodies linger. I will never forget sitting beside Anne West, a beloved saint of my former church, as her breath slowed and her eyes closed. I stopped speaking and began singing the words to Amazing Grace, and for a moment, her eyes opened. She smiled and mouthed the words with me. How these saints bless us with their wisdom. Redeem the time while you can. Swiftly pass these precious hours.

Years ago now, I attended a conference at which Fred Craddock, one of the great preachers of the last century, preached two sermons. To this day, I could recite both powerful sermons verbatim. The CD recordings are all but worn out.

The sermons were wonderful, but it was Dr. Craddock's benediction at the final worship service that has most impacted me as a follower of Jesus. Just before the benediction, a bluegrass band played a rousing rendition of that great 1932 gospel hymn, "I'll Fly Away." *Some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away. To a home on God's celestial shore. Just a few more weary days, and then I'll fly away. I'll fly away.* After the

song, the old preacher stepped up to the center of the chancel, cracked a smile, and began his benediction with the words, "In the meantime..." Laughter filled the room, but then silence as he repeated the words, "In the meantime, live simply, love generously, serve faithfully, speak truthfully. And leave the rest to God."

The meantime. That's what we have. The meantime is our only time. That simple dash between our birthdate and the day of our last earthly breath. The saints in scripture and the saints in our lives offer this wisdom: Redeem the meantime. Your future is secure in the hands of God. Your place is already saved in that great company of the saints in light. So, you can make the most of the meantime.

Oh, by the way...with great excitement that night, we shared with Samuel that we had agreed to coach his team. He didn't even seem to hear us, so absorbed was he in a *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* book.

Oh well, I thought. Turned out the light and walked out of the room. But later that night, long after bedtime, our son came in to our room. *Thank you, Mom and Dad, for coaching my team.*

Time well spent.