

2018 07 01 - Fullness of Time

There is an old story that when Michelangelo was painting the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, he sent away all his assistants because he was unsatisfied with their imperfect work, and continued with the work alone. Pope Julius would come by to yell up at him in the scaffolding 'when will my ceiling be ready?' Michelangelo would grit his teeth and mutter 'when it is finished'.

Have you ever abandoned a project? Perhaps you started something but were not able to see it through to the end. It's happened to me - more than once. In some cases, I wish I could have finished and I regret whatever interrupted my progress. In other cases I am happy to have quit, because it was the most sensible decision. I try to finish things that other people are expecting, but I'm not always successful – and those are when I feel especially guilty.

On the other hand, have you ever felt deep satisfaction at a completed project? Perhaps a book you read, a race you finished, or a song you learned? It would be something that you can come back to and reflect on as a milestone, a distinct part of your life story, even as you go on to focus on new things. I have often had a hard time enjoying the projects I have completed, or even noticing that they are finished, because I am rushing into the next thing to be done. But there are some things that I am proud of, and I would like to hear what you are proud of.

So, after the service, come and tell me about something you completed that gives you satisfaction.

Last week in this church we celebrated two milestones. The first was the conclusion of another year of Sunday School. As a community we blessed the work we have done together, gave thanks, and commissioned the youth going on to serve at camps this summer. We also marked Pride Sunday, I believe for the first time as the focus of our service, which makes it a milestone in its own right, which included a timeline of events in the struggles for LGBTQ rights here in Turtle Island over the last 400 years. Both the end of Sunday School and the Pride service marked something completed, but also turned our attention towards what is still to come, what is not yet complete.

The portion of the letter from Paul that was read earlier was to the community in Corinth who had begun a project the previous year, but apparently needed some encouragement to see it through. Members of the congregation with experience in either project management or fundraising may have found themselves nodding along to the reading – there are some

familiar elements as Paul tries to get the Corinthians to follow up on an earlier pledge to send support to impoverished churches elsewhere.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

Paul starts by pointing them to the example of Jesus, who gave up power and authority and security in order to care for the wounded and lost as servant and saviour. Paul is not messing around. He wants the Corinthians to pay attention.

And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it.

Framing this as a 'win-win', Paul is trying to bring his readers back to their earlier enthusiasm, to get them back on track.

So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.

In other words - "good intentions and an empty sack are worth the empty sack". Paul is telling them to follow through. Their strong enthusiasm at the start was a good thing, but if it doesn't result in support for those that need it, it really does not amount to anything.

For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack."

Just as he referred to Jesus in order to support his argument, Paul now encourages them not to see it as a loss or expense, but as the establishment of fairness. I think it's safe to assume that this is not just moralizing for its own sake, as there could easily have been those among the Corinthians who were concerned with keeping the lights on at home. With his quote he reminds them of the provision of Mana in the desert, where there was enough for everyone, and no-one could use more than needed.

Paul's message is pretty clear, even if his spin takes some of the bite out – the Corinthians need to share their wealth like they promised a year ago. He is calling them to turn away from the fear that they will lose out, and to finish what they started.

I'm struck by his encouragement to complete. An artist friend of mine told me once that her biggest challenge with personal discipline was to finish projects that didn't work, or that she did not like, or that would not sell. She explained that she would always want to move on to the next thing - the new idea, the promising prospect. It was difficult to be excited about finishing up work that wasn't going anywhere. But, she explained, you learn different things from finishing a piece than from starting it. If all you do is start projects, you don't ever learn how to finish them well.

It's been a year, says Paul. It's time to finish up this one. Your enthusiasm was good, but actually sending the money is quite a lot better, and will be more rewarding for you too. It will draw you into a deeper relationship of mutual aid. It will bring you closer to the experience of Jesus. And it's the fair thing to do.

Speaking of the fair thing, last week we heard about Jesus and the disciples in the Gospel of Mark crossing over to the over side of the lake, encountering a great storm. This week they have returned, finding a great crowd awaiting them.

Before they can talk about what they saw on the far shore, Jairus pushes his way through the crowd, looking for Jesus, and throws himself into the dirt. He is a desperate man, for the sake of his daughter, he is there as a father. And, he is an important man also, whose name was remembered when the Gospel was recorded, who speaks with authority as he makes this request.

But there is another in the crowd, a woman sick for twelve years, impoverished and ashamed, and she also needs to be healed. She does not have a voice, here. She cannot legitimately be out in public. She certainly can't throw herself at the feet of Jesus and tell him what is wrong with her.

Whose situation is more desperate? The silenced woman who has suffered the last twelve years, who has spent everything she has? Or the child lying sick, and her father throwing himself into the dirt to loudly claim the presence of Jesus?

Well of course, if it were any of us, the child would get priority. She is close to death, she is far away, and she is a child. This woman has lived for twelve years with this condition. For whatever reason, right or wrong, her need does not take priority. And yet. Jairus is an important man in the synagogue. I wonder how used he is to having everything go his way. It must have seemed God's providence when Jesus' boat made land and it was not too late for him to bring the great healer and teacher in to his household, Jairus swiftly resolving this

near tragedy with his quick actions and selfless devotion to his daughter above his own dignity.

And then Jesus stops and looks around as if he has caught a glimpse of an old friend in the crowd, and brings her over and chats with her. Who is this, Jairus wonders, and what does it have to do with my daughter? Why is Jesus stopping? Where is his urgency? Why is this important? And then the heart-stopping sight – a grim-faced member of kin, who would only have left the sick bed with the worst of news.

Jairus is acting in a hopeless situation out of a sense of hope. But so is the other women. In her story we can sense that ancient prophetic question ‘How long?’ How long is this going to go on for? When will I be healed? When will fairness and righteous be established? This is they cry of those who can imagine a good resolution, but cannot see how it will happen. And it is a theme throughout the prophetic literature.

The dialogue between the prophet Habakkuk and God as they see a corrupt society echoes today.

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?
3 Why do you make me see iniquity,
and why do you idly look at wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
4 So the law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted.

And the Bible sometimes offers answers to that question ‘how long’. In the Book of Daniel, the prophet recounts an encounter with an angel after three weeks of mourning and fasting. The angel explains that he was sent to respond to Daniel 21 days before, as soon as he began his mourning, but was delayed along the way by spiritual opposition. In fact, throughout the Bible, how long things take is a bit of a theme. Everything from the days of creation, the years of kings, time in exile, periods in the wilderness and symbolic numbers are used to give the message that God’s plans take time.

In Revelation chapter 10 there is a strange moment where the blowing of the Seven Trumpets is interrupted by an angel who appears and promises 'no more delays'. And then there are a series of delays until they resume blowing the trumpets in the next chapter.

What all of this tells us is that our ancestors in the faith had the same set of feelings that we may have. Confronted by the large injustices of the world, confronted by the intimate unfairness of sickness and disorder, and believing that God is good, we ask 'how long?' What's taking so long? You can imagine both Jairus and the sick woman in the Gospel reading asking the same thing, with different forms of desperation. Part of our faith is giving voice to those very real feelings, this longing for God's justice and reign to be made complete on Earth as it is in Heaven.

But asking the question does not mean that you will like the answer. When Habakkuk asks, he records the response of the Lord.

5 "Look among the nations, and see;
wonder and be astounded.
For I am doing a work in your days
that you would not believe if told.

It sounds pretty good, until God elaborates on the specifics. God's plan is to stop the wickedness in Israel by sending the Babylonians to destroy the nation. It's not a very reassuring answer. It's as if you complain that you have been imprisoned, and your rescuer reassures you that the prison will soon be on fire.

It seems that throughout scripture, God's response to these cries of 'how long' is 'hold on. I am working on it. Things are happening that you do not perceive'.

And here our ideas of justice collide with God's vision. For us, justice must be established right away for it to be meaningful. What do we want? Justice. When do we want it? [now]
I said What do we want?
When do we want it?

That's right we want it now! Justice delayed is justice denied! If you're going to promise to send money to your siblings who are suffering, you'd better do it right away! Or what, do you need someone to send you a letter a year later to remind you? To make you feel good about your good intentions and ask you to follow through?

The first thing that oppressed people ever hear is 'be patient. Don't ask for too much'.

How long, O Lord? How long do I need to bleed, hidden, alone, afraid? Who can tell me that my pain is not as important as the child of privilege who has lived in comfort all her life? How many years do I have left? How many will be enough?

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere!

When will the children be returned to their parents? When will the walls fall and the borders be torn down? When will all people be welcomed and celebrated, people of all nations and all genders and all gifts and capacities? When will human rights be respected and the flourishing of creation be uplifted? How long, O Lord? How bad do things have to get?

And the answer in scripture is – be patient. Hold on. I am coming soon.

It is not very satisfying. I'm serious. This is an affront to human dignity. It is deeply upsetting. But there is something that I need to make clear. The answer 'be patient' is not a dismissal of the question 'how long' or the person asking the question.

I believe that this anger, this forceful demand, this fierce longing, is a spiritual gift, and a part of our function as the Body of Christ. We are meant to ask 'how long'. I also believe that God has an answer, or rather, God is answering. And another part of our function is to help one another engage that answer, even when it is unsatisfying, upsetting.

There is a phrase in the Third Eucharistic prayer of the Anglican tradition that has always stuck with me. 'In the fullness of time, reconcile all things in Christ, and make them new'.

God's completion comes in the fullness of time. Justice comes in the fullness of time. Looking for that completion within the fullness of time means that we recognise that God is present, right here and now, in our present.

In *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, Jean Pierre de Caussade writes "the present moment is the ambassador of God to declare [God's] mandates." Time itself is the place where God's plan is being revealed.

It is not that God is waiting backstage for things to get worse, in order to make a grand entrance and fix everything. Praying 'in the fullness of time reconcile all things in Christ and

make them new' means that this very moment is the moment that another stage of God's plan is being completed. God is bringing creation closer to its full reconciliation with God.

But what about justice right here, right now? This is urgent!

Here, we need to follow the example of God, who is at the end of the day, wilful and wily cheat. You know the set up - Jesus is confronted by the needs of two daughters, one far away and dying, the other hidden nearby and suffering. And he broke the rules and healed them both. The miracle is not that the dead child was brought back to life, it is that everyone was healed that day. No one was told to wait or be patient or hold off bothering Jesus because he was trying to save a little girl's life. We have to break the rules as well, as best as we can, for the good of as many as we can.

But not all of us are breaking the rules each day. Some of us are like that woman, who could only take the greatest risk and reach out for her own healing. Some of us are like Jairus, who can only elbow through the crowd with our privilege and power to advocate for a helpless little one. And some of us are lying at home, unmoving, waiting to be called into life, and brought to the table for a meal.

I believe that the cry of 'How Long', whether anguished or exhausted or hopeless, is a legitimate prayer to the One who is at work. So keep offering that prayer with all the anger you can offer. Keep on working for justice right now. Keep being dissatisfied with the compromises that the world tries to offer. God expects better, and in the fullness of time, we can glimpse the completeness waiting to break out.

Jacob Riis, whose feast day is honoured tomorrow in the United States, wrote

"When nothing seems to help, I go look at a stonecutter hammering away at a rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundredth and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it but all that had gone before."