

The Gift of Time

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In classrooms all across America recently, students and teachers heard lots of reports entitled "What I Did On My Summer Vacation," and since you just paid for mine, I thought you deserved to hear a little about what I did with your investment.

I got my exercise regimen back on track. I got my program of reading Hebrew every day back on track. I made bookshelves. I cleaned out cluttered corners and closets. I bought excellent sweet corn at the Green Road Farmer's Market. When the heat allowed, I cooked a couple of new dishes. I visited my sisters and met the new dogs in their lives. I crossed another item off my bucket list when I made it to East Liverpool, Ohio, where America's largest public land survey began at the Point of Beginning in 1785. And with the help of this book, a gift from Don and Marilyn Wilson, I visited ten more of Ohio's eighty-eight county courthouses.

But the main thing I did with the three weeks of unstructured time you gave me was enjoy that great gift – the gift of time. Freed from the demands of my weekly schedule, I was able to accept every day of those three weeks as the gift that every second of every moment of every hour of every day is. Temporarily relieved of the claims of the computer and the telephone, I was able to recover a sense of what the writer of Ephesians meant when he urged his fellow believers to be about the business of "making the most of the time," or, as the King James more accurately translated today's text, "redeeming the time."

That's what the Greek word *exagoradzo* means. It means literally "to buy back," which is what the Bible means when it uses that heavily-laden theological term "redeem." In both testaments, redeemers, whether they're human or divine, are those who buy back something or someone who has been alienated from their rightful place or group or state of being. When God redeems us, we are bought back from a world that has taken us captive with its false promises of security and fulfillment, and the price of that purchase was God's sacrifice of God's own self on the cross, which we describe with another fraught theological term, the atonement.

And unlike stocks and bonds or houses or cars, people can choose their redemption, their being bought back, and we can also refuse to be redeemed. And many of us do. Like our Hebrew ancestors, we prefer to be Pharaoh's slaves rather than God's slaves, and being unwilling to allow ourselves to be redeemed, we have no hope, as Ephesians urges us to do, of redeeming the time in which we live.

Redemption always comes with a price; make no mistake of that, and I'm convinced that one of the reasons Christianity has sunk in popularity with *hoi poloi* is because of our post-war obsession with something-for-nothing. For over half a century, we Americans in particular have been living with the all-gain-but-no-pain mentality of labor-saving devices, gimmicks instead of healthy diets, buying on credit, and gambling instead of working for justice to escape the misery of living at the bottom of the ninety-nine percent. The idea of sacrifice is anathema to most of us, and, at the level of our

badly warped economic and political system, there's a perfectly good reason people just barely getting by resent – ferociously and rightly resent – being told by their leaders that they, the struggling, need to sacrifice so that the rich can continue to live in luxury. This is what the Occupy movement was trying to say and I think they were right to say it.

But at another level, the deeper level, where religion has its home and business, we have always been aware of the necessity of sacrifice. None of us gets it all. We must make choices, and we must give up some things in order to have more important things. That's grown-up reality, and the truly grown-up among us know that it is our job to work through those tough decisions for ourselves, and to help those with whom we live to work through them also. And that working-through requires thought and care and grace and deliberation and experimentation and risk-taking and vision and time, none of which our present political discourse values.

But you do, and that's the reason you gave me the gift of time. You made the sacrifice to step up and take up some of my duties, including this one, so that I could have the time, as I described it some years ago to Jill Dugovics, to be myself. That's who I am when I'm not your pastor; I'm myself. I'm not a fraud when I stand here – at least I don't think I am – but I am responsive to what I perceive to be your needs and, on occasion, your wants. All pastors do that; it's the reason we go into this line of work.

But as all of you know, there comes a critical tipping point when, in our responsiveness to others, we lose ourselves. For the very best of reasons – raising children and grandchildren, keeping a roof over our heads, providing for college educations, volunteering for those who need us – we go and go and go and eventually we go over that psychological and emotional and spiritual horizon and we disappear altogether. That, I think, is what Jesus meant when he asked, "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

The gift of time allows us, if we will use it, to come back to ourselves. A story from Africa has it that a native guide leading an American traveler across his country stopped to set up camp in the latter part of one afternoon. The American impatiently asked the guide why they didn't push on to take advantage of the remaining hours of daylight, and the guide's response was that they had traveled fast and far and now they needed to rest so that their spirits could catch up with their bodies.

That's the gift of time. You gave it to me – for which I thank you very much – and now I'd like to return that gift to you. I'm going to sit down and shut up so that you have the opportunity – the gift of time – to allow your spirits to catch up with your bodies. The rest of this Sabbath day awaits; may we all use it well.