

The Danger of Procrastination

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 & Mark 1:14-20

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
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Jonah 3:1-5, 10 (NIV)

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” ³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. ⁴ On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

Mark 1:14-20 (NIV)

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

¹⁶ As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” ¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. ²⁰ Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

The Danger of Procrastination

Alexander Graham Bell was an amazingly talented person. He invented the multiple telegraph, the audiometer — which is used to test your hearing — the tricycle landing gear you find on airplanes, and a host of other less well-known machines.

In addition to this, he was the co-founder of the prestigious magazine *Science*, served as President of the National Geographic Society, and spent his life working with deaf people.

But the most famous of all his creations was, of course, the telephone. It also made his family, and his descendants, enormously wealthy. But he almost lost it all. You see, Bell never seemed to get around to submitting a patent application. Finally, his father-in-law, who had financed a lot of the research, got so impatient that he filed the patent on Bell's behalf on the 14th of February 1876, Bell's 29th birthday.

And it was a good thing he did, because just a few hours later, another scientist by the name of Elisha Gray went to the patent office to get a patent on a machine he'd been working on for many years — you guessed it, the telephone.

Wouldn't you agree that some things are so important that you need to act on them NOW?

A heavy rain had been falling as a man drove down a lonely road. As he rounded a curve, he saw an old farmer surveying the ruins of his barn. The driver stopped his car and asked what had happened. The farmer said, "Roof fell in. Leaked so long that it just finally rotted through." "Why in the world didn't you fix it before it got that bad?" asked the stranger. "Well, sir," replied the farmer, "it just seemed I never did get around to it. When the weather was good, there weren't no need for it, and when it rained, it was too wet to work on!"

Those of you who are homeowners know the perils of allowing home maintenance to slide. But that's true in all of life: in the things that really matter, there is a need to act with urgency.

Consider our lesson for today from Mark's Gospel. Mark tells us that Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, when He saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." Mark says, "AT ONCE they left their nets and followed Him." Notice that it doesn't say they pondered His invitation. "At once they left their nets and followed Him."

"When He had gone a little farther, He saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. WITHOUT DELAY," says Mark, "He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed Him."

How did all these men respond to Jesus' call? Without delay.

It has always amazed me that the first four disciples of Jesus' responded to His call without any seeming hesitation. Jesus was asking them to leave their livelihood, leave their families, leave the community they grew up in for an adventure the result of which they could not see — and immediately they heeded Jesus' call and followed Him. That says a lot about how Jesus came across to people, but it also says much about them. And perhaps it says even more about the task Jesus had called them to.

Mark shows us a Jesus who is in a hurry; a man with a sense of urgency. Someone has noticed that Mark used one word in his Gospel more than any other. It is the word "immediately." This word is used forty times in those brief 16 chapters of Mark's Gospel. The last thing Jesus wants is procrastinators. That's clear in Mark's Gospel. But this is not the only place Jesus expresses a sense of urgency.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus gives the same opportunity to another man who is unknown to us. "Follow me," Jesus said. But this man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God (Luke 9:59-62)." Jesus' call is one of urgency.

This is the way life is. The really important things require us to respond without delay.

CONSIDER, FOR EXAMPLE, HOW URGENT IT IS THAT WE DEMONSTRATE OUR AFFECTION FOR THOSE WE LOVE.

Years ago when the original "Dear Abby" was asked what letter was requested the most for reprinting, she put into her syndicated column this one:

"Dear Abby: I am the most heartbroken person on the earth. I always found time to go everywhere else but to see my old gray-haired parents. They sat at home, loving me just the same. Now when I go to visit their graves — I wonder if God will ever forgive me for the heartaches I must have caused them"

You may be familiar with that literary giant of another generation, Samuel Johnson. There is a famous story that comes from Johnson's boyhood. Johnson's father was a book seller — selling books from town to town — during Johnson's boyhood. Once when his father was very ill, tired and worn down by his constant struggle to support his family, he asked young Samuel to go to the market at a nearby small community to take his place. Young Samuel smugly refused to do so. His father dressed and made the arduous trip himself — never saying a word of reproach to his son.

Fifty years later, the renowned and prosperous Samuel Johnson, now his name a household word throughout England, stood bareheaded for hours close by a spot in that same small community where once his father's bookstall had stood. People stared at him as he stood there almost motionless in the midst of wind and rain. He was remembering that time long ago when his quickly aging father asked of him a small favor and he had smugly refused.

A great theologian, a man who has inspired millions of Christians, confessed a while back that he had been an abysmal failure with his own children. "How I wish," he laments, "that when my children were young, I had spent less time with my books and more time with my family."

THERE IS AN URGENCY ABOUT LOVE. THERE CAN SOMETIMES BE AN EVEN GREATER URGENCY ABOUT ALTERING A LIFESTYLE.

There comes a time when a person must change his or her way of living — and do it now!

Newspaper headlines have brought us tragic stories of the inroads that drug abuse has made into our society. Ball players, movie stars, children of famous political families as well as ordinary citizens by the thousands are having their lives destroyed by this modern plague.

Interestingly, now it is the rural communities of this country which seem to be most under attack. How low does a person have to sink — how much money does he or she have to spend — how many people do they have to hurt — before they say, “Whoa — this is it — I’ve got to get control of my life?” There comes a time when fighting a destructive habit or a debilitating weakness when you must say, “I must stop now or it will be too late.”

There is a story of a man who waited until it was too late. His name was Judas. I wonder if Judas ever intended for Christ to die. I wonder if he ever thought it would go that far. Perhaps Jesus had said something that hurt or offended him.

That happens sometimes in a church. Maybe Judas felt rejected by the other disciples. Perhaps it troubled him that he was not part of that small circle of disciples closest to Jesus — Peter, James and John — who were always there on significant occasions in Jesus’ life. Could it have been simple jealousy? “I’ll show them,” Judas may have said to himself. But it may be that he never intended for Jesus to be crucified.

“I have betrayed innocent blood,” he cried out to the temple authorities as he tried to return their money. “What is that to us?” they said with a sneer as they turned their backs on him. Suddenly Judas realized that it was too late, and he went and hanged himself.

It is an awful thing to wake up and realize it is too late — too late to save your marriage — too late, you’re hooked, you’re addicted — too late, you’ve been caught, you’ve brought disgrace to your family and friends — too late, you’ve had that tragic accident.

Do you see that there is sometimes an urgency about changing the way you are living? Stop, for God’s sake, stop, an inner voice may be saying to you this morning, before it is too late. Many people put off making necessary changes to their life until tomorrow.

AND, OF COURSE, TOMORROW NEVER COMES.

Tomorrow, someone has noted, Raphael would finish his painting of “The Transfiguration.” But he died at age thirty-four with the painting only half-finished. Two of his disciples were forced to finish the master’s work.

Sir Walter Scott wrote in his diary in his study at Abbotsford, “Tomorrow, we shall....” But this last -written sentence of one of Scotland’s greatest writers was never completed. Tomorrow never came for Sir Walter Scott.

Charles Dickens began writing what would become his final novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, in 1870, with the plan of releasing a new installment every month for a year. But he died before the last installment was ever written and his readers never discovered what happened to poor Edwin.

Important things should never be put off. Life has a way of getting away from us.

Perhaps you know the story of a woman named Florence. Florence was married to a man named Oliver for 58 years before her death. They first got married in Sweden before immigrating to the United States some 30 years ago. After his beloved wife died, Oliver saw the need to put their home in order, and immediately set about doing it.

While doing so, he found a box, opened it and found some dishes which he had never seen. He took the dishes to his eldest daughter and asked if she recognized them. Just like her father, she was surprised at seeing them.

Just about then, Oliver's second daughter came in. "Have you seen these dishes before?" he asked. She looked at the beautiful set of dishes, decorated with colorful paintings and gold. She too had no idea of the origin of the dishes.

As a last resort, Oliver decided to call his late wife's sister and ask about the dishes. Luckily, she did know the origin of the dishes. For years before her death Florence collected these dishes piece by piece because she couldn't afford to buy a complete set. When the collection neared completion she kept the dishes put away in hopes of using them during a special occasion. And because no "special occasion" came around, she chose to lock them away in the box Oliver had found.

Think how much joy Florence could have had displaying her beloved dishes to her friends and family. But she died with the dishes still in a box.

So is it with people who are always putting things off until tomorrow. So often, tomorrow never comes. If you love someone, tell them! If you're facing an important task, no matter how distasteful, tackle it! You're not going to enjoy doing it anymore when you can no longer put it off.

OF COURSE, PROCRASTINATION WITH HEEDING THE CALL OF GOD IS THE MOST SERIOUS PROCRASTINATION OF ALL.

I challenge you to find one place in the New Testament where Jesus told anybody to "go home, think it over, and get back to me tomorrow." It simply doesn't happen. Jesus comes to Simon and Andrew and James and John at their fishing boats beside the Sea of Galilee and says to them, "Follow me," and immediately they left their nets and followed Him. Jesus' invitation is always an invitation to do it now! Especially is that true with the call to follow Him.

There was an interesting interview recently in AARP Magazine, of all places, with the well-known singer/song writer John (Couger) Mellencamp, best known for his 1982 rock song “Jack and Diane.”

It may be a shock to some of you boomers to realize that Mellencamp is now 65 years old. Time is passing. In this interview Mellencamp had this to say about the final ending of his life: “I intend to make my ending good. I’m hoping it’s one of those long, lingering deathbed conversions. A lot of people say, ‘I hope I just die quick,’” he continues. “Not me. I need to put things right.”

Well, I don’t know whether he was making a joke about it or not in this interview, but I hope John Mellencamp gets the opportunity for his long conversion. Life has a way of playing tricks on us. We may not have as long as we think. And think how much peace and joy John Mellencamp could have in his life in the meantime.

There are some things in life that should not be put off. Telling people we love them is one of them. Correcting a destructive lifestyle is another. But the most important is saying “Yes” to God! If you have not already done that I hope you will take that step today! Than come talk to me about it so I can help you with your walk of faith!

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