

Leviticus 19:9-18  
Galatians 5:1, 13-14

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## A FEW MOMENTS OF YOUR TIME

For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment,  
"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (*Galatians 5:14*)

Toward the end of the book of Leviticus—a book with many extraordinary passages about social welfare, there are two chapters that deal with the year of the Jubilee. The Jubilee was intended to be celebrated every fiftieth year, and it was to be a festival to honor God and the fruitfulness of the land. No crops were to be planted—people were to live from the surplus of prior years, like Joseph's Egypt when seven years of plenty fed the people through seven predicted years of famine. Slaves were to be freed, and all debts within the community of Israel forgiven. Not surprisingly, neither the Jewish nor Christian communities in the last 3,000 years have ever taken this command seriously.

The heart of the Jubilee was to be a celebration of compassion, providential care, and goodwill, God's to us, and ours, from generous hearts overflowing into the lives of others. Why, because compassion and goodwill do more to win people to God than a thousand sermons.

Fred Craddock, who teaches homiletics as Emory, once told this story. "When I was growing up in N. Tennessee," he said, "my Father didn't go to Church. He would stay home and complain about Sunday lunch not being ready in time. Once in a while the Pastor would drop by to encourage him, but he was pretty rough on ministers.

"I know what you people want down there at the Church," he'd say, "another name on the role, another pledge." Craddock said it used to embarrass his mother terribly, and she would go off into the kitchen and cry.

From time to time they would have a visiting evangelist at the church and the pastor would bring him by. But he was just more bait for old man Craddock's hatred of the Church. "You don't care about me," he'd say, "you just want another name on the role, another pledge." He'd probably said such things a thousand times.

There was one time he didn't say it. Fred rushed across country from Oklahoma to see him. His father was in the veterans hospital, down to 74 pounds. They had to take his throat out, but they said it was too late. They put in a tube so he could breathe, but he couldn't speak. Fred Craddock said, "I looked around the room. In the windows, on the tables -- flowers; cut flowers and potted plants, everywhere. Even the swivel table that they roll across the bed had flowers on it, because he couldn't eat.

"I looked at all the little cards sprinkled in the flowers," said Fred, "and every one of them, every one: Men's Bible Class, Women's Fellowship, Youth fellowship, others at the church—every one, the flowers and the deep stack of cards beside the bed, from groups within the church."

"He saw me look at the flowers and at the cards," said Fred, "and took a pencil and wrote on the side of a Kleenex box, a line from Hamlet:

'In this harsh world,  
draw your breath in pain to tell my story.'

"What is your story, Dad," Fred asked.

He took the pencil again, and on the side of the Kleenex box he wrote his confession: "I WAS

WRONG!”

The church is an imperfect institution. As one African American saying has it, “All God’s children walk with a limp.” We occupy temporary housing this side of heaven. But the church offers a place where we can come to know the one who knows us best, Jesus Christ. And in that discovery of Christ we discover things about ourselves that have often been long buried. We learn that letting go of the talents does not diminish them but it enlarges them. With being a grandfather comes delightful duty leafing through children’s books. One was about the building of a great medieval cathedral. The cathedral’s construction echoed the radical economy at the heart of the gospel. The one who digs the footings for the foundation offers as necessary a gift in the chain of construction as the archbishop who dedicates the cathedral. The clergy who lead worship are no more prized than the one who hems the choir robes. The composer of canticles and hymns is of no more vale than the one who lays tile on the sanctuary floor. Or the architect who designs the whole than the one who slips in for an hour of sequestered prayer. Those who sing in the choir from the artist who paints frescoes on the vaulted ceiling. Each is valued by God without distinction.

We impose a different order of value on their tasks, but the work would be unfinished without any one of them. Two hundred years ago, Schleiermacher laid the foundation for Christian ministry in what came to be known as the “clerical paradigm.” It created a ministry of rigorously trained, academically sound, theologically grounded clergy who became, essentially, the ‘authorities’ in their congregations. But like many ideas it had unintended consequences. Pastors became themselves the hub of the churches ministry, while the congregation dutifully followed. Pastors became the authority figures in matters biblical, theological, and ecclesiastical, and most people in congregations largely lost their initiative to learn and pray and do the tasks of ministry themselves. Yet we speak of the priesthood of all believers. Which is still a radical and remarkably democratic economy worth pondering. Any distinction between “great” talents and “small” talents becomes rather foolish and illusory when the gifts of the congregation and the pastor are equally and faithfully offered.

The Gospel reminds us, too, that Jesus gave a new measure of significance to “a cup of cold water,” when given in love (Mt.10:42). He raised the gift of the widow’s mite above every other in that long procession of alms to the temple treasury. He insisted that to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the prisoner in her cell, was a gift of immeasurable significance to God.

Some time ago, 1400 Chicagoans met in the grand ballroom of a large hotel in that city to honor the “Mother of the Year.” She turned out to be a woman no one had heard of. She was Mrs Dominic Salvino, an Italian immigrant, a housewife, and extremely poor.

Mrs Salvino lived on Erie St. She had many neighbors who were poorer than she. They had eight children to her four; they were old, she was only 49; they were sick, she was healthy; they were tired, she was full of energy; they had drunken husbands, she had a good steady man.

So Mrs Salvino appointed herself an unofficial, untrained social worker and assigned herself to Erie St. She visited the sick. She collected money from the very poor and gave it to the desperately poor. She did the housework of the bedridden, cooked for the motherless—and spread smiles the length and breadth of Erie St. Altogether she put in about 1600 hours a year at her avocation. This was more than any other mother in Chicago had done, the Committee said.

When the renowned psychiatrist Dr. Karl Menninger was asked, “What would you advise a person to do if he or she felt a nervous breakdown coming on?” he replied, “Lock up your house, go across the railway tracks, find someone in need, and invest yourself in helping that person.”

Our church officers have a vision. When each comes on to a board, we ask them: “What would you like to accomplish during your tenure that you can especially apply yourself to.” As you can imagine, they range across the map. So they need help discovering those talents among you that often lie buried, and help put them to use for the building of this small corner of the Kingdom of God. You tell us an identifiable skill that you have that you would be willing to share, perhaps one hour a week. It might be a professional talent, a craft, a vocational skill, a counseling or advisory skill, a visual or performing arts skill. It could be something as simple as reading to one who has no sight, or a little home repair, or the offering of a modest seamstress skills, perhaps some yard work for an older person, or just an hour of conversation--some other voice more personal than the constant droning of the television. You tell us what’s in your store of gifts and we’ll do our best to match you to someone in the church or the community who needs you. We aren’t looking at 1,600 hours a year, just a cup of cool water. We aren’t looking to change the world, just to make a modest difference by the offering of our faithfulness in this small corner of it. “Our lives,” said Oswald Chambers, “must be the sacrament of our message.” And a sacrament is two things. It is an act of grace, a gift. And it is something that makes visible that which is invisible, namely our faith in Christ.

We cannot change the world, but we can build some roads to a few front doors. We can make this corner of the world a little brighter with the countenance of the Kingdom. And we might make some startling discoveries about ourselves and the gifts that are in us in the meantime.

May the Lord bless us and use us. Amen.