

“Now is the Time”

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Feb. 18, 2018

based on Mark 1:9-15

During a memorial service for a young woman — a wife and mother, with a successful career, who died decades before she should have—several of her friends come forward, one at a time, and deliver reminiscences and reflections on her life. They say she loved life, loved her husband, loved her children, loved her job. They say she loved her garden and her friends and her church. One of them departing from the norm, comes to the lectern and says,

*525,600 minutes, moments so dear,
525,600 minutes, how do you measure, measure a year?
How about love?*

If you don't recognize it, it's from *Rent*, the Broadway musical and motion picture. The cast is a company of young adults, living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Each is struggling to make it, or, at least, survive -- as musicians, composers, dancers, social activists; all struggling to find out what life is all about and to pay the rent. Several of them have HIV/AIDS. One in particular, Angel, is very sick. Several of them attend a support group. Sitting in a circle in an empty community center gym, reflecting on the future and what it will mean for them, one young man quietly asks, “Will I lose my dignity? Will someone care?”

It's a brave and poignant story of people living with a fairly high degree of alienation—from families, from society at large, hanging on to one another for support, friendship, encouragement, love. They are literally, “rent,” but they are also, family. On occasion they even become something like church for one another. They ask, for themselves and for all of us, “Will someone care?” And they sing, “How do you measure a life? How about love?”

And so we begin the Lenten season, the traditionally somber season before Holy Week and Easter. It is a time when Christians remember the great story of Jesus and his love and turn inward, reflect and do self examination. It begins, for many, with a service we observed four days ago with the imposition of ashes on our foreheads, a liturgical reminder of our mortality. Traditionally Lent has been a time for penitence and confession.

Well, let me propose to you that we begin this journey, this year, slightly differently, by pondering the gift of love in the context of passing time; God's love and the love God's love awakens in our human hearts. How about love?

Lent this year began as always, on Ash Wednesday, but it was also Valentine's Day. And if you skipped Ash Wednesday and instead had a dinner date with your beloved or a good friend or two, that's more than okay. This year, let me bless that as a worthy liturgical celebration, as well.

But let us not let go of the tradition of Lenten introspection. This whole season, all six Sundays, I want to look, in every sermon, about how the limits of time affect our lives – how time may be meant to spur us, or sober us a little, and hopefully, deepen is. That will be my goal. Now, back to the musical number we opened with --

*Five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred minutes.
Five hundred twenty five thousand journeys to plan.
Five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred minutes.
How do you measure a life of a woman or a man?*

*In truths that she learned,
or in times that he cried?
In bridges he burned,
or the way that she died?*

Let me say a word about that last one. "The way that she died." I doubt that you know the name, Catherine Coulson. Well, Catherine was an actor. Among many roles she played in a long career, the best known of them was the quirky *Log Lady* on David Lynch's television series, *Twin Peaks*. For those of you who didn't have the pleasure of seeing her in that, she was the oddest one in the odd little town of Twin Peaks. She had this habit of always carrying a small log around in her arms as if it were a baby, and she seemed to share a psychic connection with it, often dispensing advice and visions she insisted came to her from "the log";

Well, Catherine was a very good friend of mine. She died 2 years ago at the age of 71.

I heard about it from mutual friends and found the following information in a news piece noting her passing. Allow me to quote it directly ...

Imagine the surprise of the answering service at Litwiller Simonsen Funeral Home when they found this log of a call Catherine made to the office 48 hours before she died.

CEC: Good evening, this is Catherine Coulson. That's C-O-U-L-S-O-N, and the Catherine's with a C and an -ine. I don't know if you've been contacted yet by someone else, but I wanted to alert you to a pick-up I'll need in the next day or so. I've never died before so I'm not exactly sure how long it will take.

LS: Oh, Ms. Coulson, I'm so sorry to hear this.

CEC: I do appreciate your compassion, but we all have to die sometime.

LS: Would you like the funeral director to call you back?

CEC: That won't be necessary. Is there any other information you'd need from me? My social security number? My address? Even my age?

I know, it sounds a bit odd, but I know that she did that out of total love for her little family. She imagined how hard it would be for them to make that call and decided she could do it herself.

The Greek Stoic philosopher, Epictetus is remembered to have said, "It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters in life."

Well, Catherine Coulson knew how to deal with the good stuff in life and she also knew how to deal with all the rest that a relatively long life can throw at you.

She didn't squander a moment. She was a wonderful actor. And thinking back on her life in the theater, on television and in film, it occurs to me that she never had a big part. What she had were a succession of these little quirky roles, one after another, like the *Log Lady*.

She told me once how much she adored being cast to play the grave-digger in *Hamlet*. The grave-digger scene is all of five minutes, but every word in it is pure gold. I mean, in a play where the main character says, "To be or not to be," a scene shared by Hamlet and a gravedigger has got to me seminal, and it is.

Now, think about our lives, yours and mine. Our lives are full of quirky little roles too, aren't they – I'm talking about those defined little moments when we are with our loved ones, or little moments in our work days.

We've got something the people we work next to count on us to do with a certain care or panache. Or maybe that defined moment is a ten-minute ride, taking our grandkids to school. Maybe it's making lunch for someone we don't even know, but they need some help because they're sick. Or maybe it's how we will decide to behave at the doctor's when we get some crazy news.

I remember an older woman in my last church who had an appointment with her doctor following some cognitive tests. Her whole family went along, all eight of them. The doc said, "Mrs. Hunter, I'm afraid the tests are conclusive. All indications are that you have Alzheimer's disease.

She took a moment, and looked around at everyone, and then she said, “You know, I don’t see this as my problem.” What she was saying was, that by the time the symptoms would get really bad she wouldn’t even know it. Well, like my friend Catherine, it was really her way of trying to soften the blow for the ones she loved.

You see, she grabbed the moment, filled it with some humor and a little grace, and it’s what we all marveled at years later at her memorial service.

There’s a wonderful character in the film, *Field Of Dreams*, played by Burt Lancaster. His name is Archibald “Moonlight” Graham. He’s a doctor, but once long ago, he was a two-bit baseball professional who once got to play one inning of baseball in the major leagues, but he never got up to bat. One inning. In the film he tells the Kevin Costner character this:

“You know we just don’t recognize the most significant moments of our lives while they’re happening. Back then I thought, ‘Well, there’ll be other days.’ I didn’t realize that that was the only day.”

It’s moments like that one that define a life, you know. They tend to wake you up. They can make you think the way Jesus is thinking in this morning’s text from the gospel of Mark, when he says, “Now is the time!” He says that partly because *now is all we got*.

As I said in my meditation for Ash Wednesday, my oldest relative died last week. Her name was Jan Little – I’ve spoken about her in a sermon or two over the years and I imagine I will do it some more in the coming weeks since she is heavy on my mind right now. Well, in this season of loss my first grandchild turned 4 months. It’s a good design, I think, this going and this coming in life.

Time passes and it gives us two lessons. 1) Time is unstoppable, and 2) every moment can be about love. I think that’s why most of us live to be grandparents. The profound loving and losing that is the core curriculum of life takes four to seven decades to fully experience.

Here is the result of a life-lesson of mine connected with my daughter. It comes to you from me in the form of a poem I wrote a year or two ago. I call it ...

Famnesia

There is a book
that marks my daughter’s
first words,
 first steps,
 first tastes.

Why, then, can't I remember
the *last* time
I carried her
 upstairs to bed,
the last time
 she called me
daddy, the last time
 I read a picture book
 to her?

I can't remember
because I didn't know
it was the last time.

If I'd known,
would I have wept,
 marked the moment
 with an extra kiss,
held her closer,
 longer?

Do you remember any "last times?" Or, let me rephrase that – did you ever wake up and realize something was a *last time* that passed with no notice? This stuff happens every day.

From time to time I have spoken to you about Huston Smith, a wonderful scholar of world religions who was also a Christian. Late in life he wrote a lovely book called, *The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition*.

In that book he observed that the people who heard Jesus' disciples proclaiming "Good News" were impressed as much by what they saw as by the word they heard. Jesus' followers were in awe of this man they walked with in the Galilee region of Palestine. As a result, they had been transformed, changed by just being with him. They became new people.

Smith concludes that it was love that did it, "God's love was precisely what the first Christians felt. They had experienced Jesus' love and became convinced that Jesus was [in some way] God incarnate. Once that love reached them it could not be stopped."

Smith goes on to propose that just as the power hidden in the atom is only released by bombardment from without, so the love planted by God in every human soul is released and activated and called out by love's bombardment.

I like that idea. A loving human being, Smith says, “is not produced by exhortations, rules, or threats.” Not at all. He notes that “love takes root in children only when it comes to them.”

I have been so lucky to have been around lots of children all my professional life. I’ve mentioned before that I was once asked if I wanted to pastor a church three times as large as this one where everyone in it was 55 or above. I said, “No thank you.” Not because I don’t love older people, I do, but because I think a church to be a church needs to have children in it – they give us all purpose and reasons to be.

With things happening like what just happened in Florida, children don’t just need us, we need to hear them because the older generations in this country have clearly failed them and they are beginning to tell us so in no uncertain terms, God bless them.

Huston Smith says, there is a great moment when the connection of love between generations happens. You can’t just say to a baby “I’m glad you’re here and I like you a lot” and hope he or she understands. No, we whistle and make funny noises and sing songs, and talk baby talk, and in doing that, we bombard little ones with love.

I can see in little videos my daughter posts on Facebook, how she is doing that with her tiny daughter and I can see how love, in turn, is called out of my granddaughter by that kind of hourly showering or deep adoration.

That it is a great metaphor for the Divine–human encounter.

Speaking of the story of Jesus we read this morning, the Rev. John Buchanan has said:

Lent begins with Jesus in the desert, dry, hungry, alone, maybe full of doubt and misgiving about his own life and his prospects; maybe full of uncertainty about what he is supposed to do next; maybe tired of the daily routine of his life, bored; maybe feeling alienated from his family; maybe feeling distant from and impatient and alienated from God even.

But angels come and minister to him, bombarding the vulnerable Jesus with beams of God's love. Yes, and he learns that there is nowhere he can go, even the driest, loneliest desert, that God's steadfast love cannot find him and come to him and embrace him and hold him and then call out of him his own fierce, unconditional love, his own love that will take him to the crisis of Good Friday and his cross and death—still loving, loving to the last, still willing to live his life, every minute of it, right up to the last minute, loving his friends, you and me, the whole wide world, answering God's steadfast, faithful love.

“How can you measure a life? How about love?”

As I have said, love is expressed best when we seize a moment, make eye contact with someone, and let them know with a look, a gesture, or a word, that they are very special. Conversely, the way we communicate the opposite is not to seize a moment – but to focus on our smart phones instead, or something else that threatens to addict us.

Well, 51,829 minutes are left in Lent, this holy season. There are some things we can give up in this season. People do that in Lent. But, I imagine there are also some things we can dedicate ourselves to, too. *Now is the time.* It's all we've got. Let's not let it be squandered.

Amen