

“Teach us to number our days....”

A few decades ago, I received a sheepish call from my parents asking if I would mind crossing the state line to buy fifty dollars' worth of lottery tickets. In my family, one never minds doing what one is asked to do, especially if it is my mother doing the asking. So somewhat against my better theological judgment, I set out. The first line I encountered, in Yardley, I believe, and in which I stood for about fifteen minutes, was an incredible hodgepodge of God's children: a mix of ages, races, economic classes. Yet, without distinction, all of us held the secret thought that we were about to have our lives radically changed--our limits, in a sense, transgressed. But when the line did not move, and when one weary ticket holder returned announcing, "Four and a half hours: think about it," I did not even think. I absented myself from hope.

But on the way home I did think about it, as a preacher often does. And what I thought about was what it would mean--in the line at the grocery store or the post office or the turnpike, not to mention in lottery lines--what it would mean to live with a sense of "time left." What would we do and what would we dare if we knew our time left were limited? Lottery lines? I think not. But what then? Which is to ask, what *do* we do and what are we daring in the face of the fact that the time each of us has left is limited? I want to wrestle this morning with the strange gift of our finitude, of our limits, of our human frailty, of our time left.

"A few years ago we had a constantly cheerful minister in town," Carol Bly wrote from the vantage point of Madison, Minnesota in the sixties. "No one was less apprehensive than he. He wasn't nervous about the hydrogen bomb and he wasn't nervous about our participation in the Vietnam War. Then he became critically ill, and upon recovery he preached for an entire winter the first serious, thoughtful sermons of his life, or at least of his life here. Any number of people complained that the sermons had gone morbid and `negative.' They hadn't. He simply had learned a sense of time left."

Where does one acquire a sense of time left? I am not sure. For some it must come, as it did for the preacher in Minnesota, when faced with one's own death--when finitude is not only a philosophical category but a present probability: when the diagnosis is doubtful, when the accident almost fatal, when age does catch up and begin significantly to overtake the you you have always been. Yet I think a sense of time left is also lurking in all the little limits we are given day by day until our last: the biological clock that ticks within a woman and begins to close off the possibility of bearing children; the societal clock that begins to put you out to pasture long before you are ready to retire; the signals within the business or the academy or the political structures that you have gone about as far as you can go.

Sometimes a sense of time left can be as arbitrary and fleeting as a deadline. Incredible, said a friend, how much housework I can get done in a day when I know the in-laws are due for supper...or how much homework can be done when the prospect of a party lies ahead! Or another noted with interest that he had accomplished more in his last three years leading up to retirement than in any time before then. Maybe this nagging sense of time left speeds us on our way--an arbitrary end point that sends us momentarily into the future with a renewed sense of urgency.

Or again and in a different way, a sense of time left may be given in the presence of something as intangible and unspeakable as love's fragility. How quickly a child grows up and away while a parent grabs hold of the time left. Or how condensed a lifetime together seems for two who have managed to stay married and in love for ten years, twenty-five years, sixty-nine years? Or how the days are numbered more tenderly when you are accompanying your mother through the valley of the shadow. Because of another's dearness and finitude, we can be given a sense of time left that intensifies the life we have been given together.

A third portent of time left are in the regrets that fill an ordinary week. So much of my conversation with God during Sunday morning's confession of sin has to do with the gift of time mindlessly frittered away and so my responsibility for the time left. How much I have left undone and how much I have done that I ought not to have done--not in the sense of great sins, I suppose, but in the sense of great waste. Therein I resolve to do better and still, the next Sunday, I say the same in silence.

Back to the lottery line. If we lived with a sense that this day could be our last, surely we would pack it full of significant relationships, lasting achievements, intense encounters, matters of consequence, until the question before us would *constantly* be, "What can I do, be, accomplish, mean...in the time that is left." It would have been the question of this sermon were it not for the fact that the 90th Psalm is our text.

"So teach us to number our days," the psalmist wrote, and one gets the idea he is not interested in the things

accomplished by those who number their days or even the personal fulfillment reported by those who reflect on their lives with some degree of satisfaction. The psalmist begins rather from the infinite distance of eternity and from that perspective considers time left, considers human finitude. "Before looking downward," Paul Tillich proclaimed, "[the psalmist] looks upward. Before considering (hu)man misery he points to God's majesty. *Only because we look at something infinite can we realize that we are finite. Only because we are able to see the eternal can we see the limited time that is given to us.*" The psalmist's sense of time left has its origins in an encounter with the Eternal God.

"Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God." Our dwelling place, he reminds us, is in the presence of the Eternal God and from that place we may see our lives and our allotted time. What the psalmist sees at first glance would seem to be the futility of it all: "Thou turnest man back to dust...For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past...Thou sweepest men away; they are like a dream...like grass...The years of our lives are threescore years and ten and if, by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow, for it is soon cut off and we fly away." What is he saying about our lives, about our finitude, about our time left from the perspective of our dwelling place with the Eternal God?

I think, unless you and I are incredibly arrogant, we must listen in awe as we consider our days and what has filled them in relation to the eternal purposes of God. It is not that the psalmist thinks life is worthless or meaningless or futile--that would barely have crossed an ancient writer's mind. It is that he is stopped short, in a way we have forgotten how to be, by God's eternal purposes. Only in the presence of the infinite does this finite man truly see all of his efforts. And what he sees is that the prizes won, the volumes written, the buildings erected, the degrees earned, the positions attained, the money amassed are as nothing--a dream, grass, dust, but toil and trouble--when placed in the presence of the God who brought forth the mountains and formed the earth and the world. That is a very hard word for us to hear in a society that so values individual achievements or importance and, at such an early age, teaches our children to value the same.

Therefore, in contrast to those who would let a sense of time left propel them toward filling their lives full of even more achievements and purposes and goals, this man calls into question the assumption that there even is such a thing as human achievement! For the psalmist, any presumption that our efforts will amount to something of eternal importance is a presumption to be like God--to have no end. And God's judgment against that desire is nothing other than the fact of our mortality, our finitude, our sense of time left. "No wonder," Old Testament professor Arthur Weiser writes in his commentary on this psalm, "that a man who seeks in life his will and his pleasure is bound to end in this disappointment; for all pleasure seeks perpetuity. In death God has set a limit to such human aspirations."

In death, God has set a limit to such human aspiration because in death we come face to face with the love for which we were made, the love that knows no end, the love that God is. What the psalmist encounters at his own end, his finitude and in his time left is both the limit to his human aspirations and the love that knows no end. Gone is any illusion of gaining God's notice by clean living or lasting achievements. Gone is any frantic need to make a name for himself before he breathes his last. Instead he prays: "Satisfy us in the morning with thy steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days..." It is the prayer of one who trusts, in the presence of the Eternal God, that our days--no matter how many or how few--are fulfilled, are satisfied by the unmerited gift of God's steadfast love and mercy and grace. "Let *thy* work be manifest to thy servants and thy glorious power to their children..." It is the prayer of one who no longer is driven by his own purposes but who is held in God's purposes and so freed for the work of a servant. "Establish thou the work of our hands upon us, yea, the work of our hands, establish thou it." It is the prayer of one who has been given work to do by the One who has been our dwelling place in all generations, the One who is from everlasting to everlasting our God.

For the psalmist that revelation came as he faced his own death in the presence of the Eternal God, but for you and for me and for the minister in Madison, Minnesota, that revelation has been given in the death of Him whose "time left" was bracketed by a cross. In Him the infinite entered the finite. In Him the eternal invaded our time left. In Him the One who has been our dwelling place from generation to generation came to dwell with us and reveal to us that our days have been numbered for love's sake, that our nights will be restless until we rest in Him; and that, at the hour of our death, be it this hour or another, we may know Him who has redeemed the time, even the time spent in a lottery line, from insignificance. Thanks be to God.