

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

Forester Church, *Love and Death*

“How to Say Goodbye”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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It was Woody Allen who said, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work, I want to achieve immortality by not dying." But how do we achieve immortality unless we die? Or how do we come to understand the deeper meanings of life unless we are aware of, and deal with, death? The writer of Ecclesiastes knew it, there is a time to be born and there's a time to die. And God has put a sense of eternity into the human spirit. And God designs it. Nothing better for us than to be happy, and enjoy ourselves, as long as we live. So let us think about death, and let us think about life.

Max Lucado tells the story of a doctor in Arkansas who misdiagnosed a patient and declared her dead. The family was told. The husband grieved in tears. Two hours later one of the nurses discovered that the woman was alive and said to the doctor, "Don't you think you ought to tell the family?" Embarrassed, the physician phoned the family at home, said to the husband, "I need to talk to you about the condition of your wife." He

said, "The condition of my wife? What do you mean? She's dead." "Well," the doctor mumbled, "she's seeing slight improvement."

Death is coming, but there is life to be lived. Forester Church, pastor of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, son of Frank Church, Senator Church, told that he was terminal, had just weeks to live. The doctors were wrong. He lived months longer. Slight improvement. But in time he did die, and he knew he would die. And in that period of time from when he knew he would die to the time he did, a period of time longer than they thought, he wrote this book, *Love and Death: A Journey Through the Valley*, in which he said goodbye. And it was in that book that he wrote, "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and knowing we will die." A time to live, a time to die. Death will come, but we have life to live yet. A touch of the eternal. How to achieve immortality? God wants us to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live. Reverend Church said it. We cannot avoid adversity, loss, failure, but we do have a choice on how we will respond, and he said, "Happiness is to be found when we can do three things: Want what we have, do what we can, be who we are."

So this morning let's see if that works. A time to live, a time to die. Death will come. Life to live. A touch of the eternal. In the human soul, every one of us has it. God wants us to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live. What does it mean, first of all, to be happy with what we have? Jesus said, do not lay up for yourselves treasures that are on earth where the moth can destroy and the thief can steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures that are in heaven. What does he mean? I think he is saying, be happy with what you have, and don't make a fool of yourself thinking that more is better. Some of you watch evangelist Joel Osteen, I know you do because you tell me. He preaches what is called a prosperity gospel. People who are critical of Osteen suggest that he is advocating the idea that we have to acquire more and more to be rich, and that's what God wants for us, more and more prosperity. I'm not exactly sure he's saying that, though sometimes perhaps, but there is something basic there. Osteen says one of the most important aspects of seeing ourselves in God's way involves developing a prosperous mindset. God has already, he says, equipped us with everything we need to live a prosperous life. It's what we have.

With the protests going on these days between the tea party and the occupants, something has been lost. It's as if the 1% of us said to be rich, my concern is with the 99% of us who are poor, or feel poor. 1% of the people have so much they don't know what they have. That's a problem. 99% of the people don't have what they want, and think more is the answer. That's a problem. Any politician who thinks we can all be happy if a few of us are rich, or we can all be happy if we redistribute our wealth, is wrong. It's not about what we have. It's about how we feel about what we have. It's as if we can make ourselves happy by having more. We can't. The truth is, we will not be happy until we want what we have. Not that we have nothing, but that we feel blessed by what we have to the point that we will share it.

Economic justice is an issue, but so is happiness. Maybe even a bigger one. Do we want what we have? For example, Hannah Alkire and her husband Joe Scott are singers,

professional performers. Joe plays the doubleneck guitar. Hannah plays the cello. They are, together, the AcousticEidolon. Some of you perhaps have heard them. They were here in Fort Collins a couple of months ago, and Hannah told us about her cello. It was built especially for her, a special piece of wood, unusual tone in that cello. On a trip to Europe, United Airlines stowed that cello in the baggage compartment, and something terrible happened. When they got to London, the cello was broken. The neck and back piece all that remained, the rest was splintered, and the airline paid \$100, that was their policy. The instrument is priceless. Back home in Colorado, Hannah took the broken wood to the cello maker. He said, "You know, Hannah, I have the piece of wood that I used, some of it, left. But I made the original cello and I almost threw it away. Last week I almost threw it away because I had no use for it, but I kept it, and I think I can remake your cello," and he did. Same wood, same wonderful tone. Joe and Hannah travel all over the world. She grew up in Berthoud. They travel all over the world, and when they fly anywhere, they pay for three seats, one for the cello, one for each of them. That cello is worth more than the money it took to buy it. It's a symbol of her gift to the world. She wants what she has.

Over the years, probably ten years, I've written from time to time articles for a religious magazine called *The Progressive Christian*. It was *Zion's Herald* at one time. I've written I suppose ten or fifteen articles. I get paid for my words. Fifty dollars an article, over \$500 over the years. A check comes for fifty dollars. I take it to a bank. They convert that check to a fifty-dollar bill, then I take the fifty-dollar bill and take it to another bank and then they convert that to fifty dollar coins, which I put in a container in our home, which is actually a spittoon. I'm proud of the articles. I have them on file. I'm pleased with how I've been paid for them, and every now and then, you come to visit us, I'll go into that spittoon and I'll pull out one of those coins and I'll give it to you, and that gives me great pleasure. But what gives me the most fun, not the articles I've tucked away in my desk at home, not the \$500 or so dollars I've received over the years, but our grandson, when he visits, he knows where those coins are, he takes them out and he hides them. He scatters them all over our house, and when he leaves, it's like an Easter egg hunt. I want what I have, and I hope for you that you want what you have, because in some degree that is a key to happiness.

I know a man who owns a pickup truck. It's something his dad gave him when he was 18 years old. He's sixty-something now. And you can sit, because I've done it, in the passenger side of that pickup truck and you're going down the road and you can look down at the floorboard of that truck and guess what? You can see the ground. It's all rusted out. The springs on that thing are loose, but it gets you where you want to go. And he wouldn't trade that truck for a Mercedes or a BMW or any other car that any of y'all have that you brought to church. I know a woman who has over 100 manger scenes, and she keeps these in her house, year round, all these creches, these manger scenes, and she's going to loan us some of them in a couple of months. We're going to put them up as an art display. Do you want what you have? Is it a tennis racket that you had in high school that you won the state tournament with? Is it a fishing pole you caught the big fish with? Is it an iron kettle your grandma gave you or a quilt or the Ark of the Covenant for Israel or the Holy Grail, the Last Supper? I wonder what Mary and Joseph did with the

frankincense and myrrh and some of the gold? I wonder if they kept it? I don't know. I wonder about Mary Magdalene or whoever it was who had the costly oil and put it on Jesus' feet. Wonder how long they'd been hanging on to that? If we want what we have, that means we know what we have, and we see a time to live and a time to die and a touch of the eternal and God wants us to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live.

Secondly, not only want what we have, but do what we can. Whatever it is, do what we can. A professor at a university like Colorado State University, on a tenure track, invited the dean of the school for dinner. Her husband thought it would be a good idea. She didn't think he would come, but he did. They got through the dinner. It was lovely. Dessert was served. She apologized for not having cheese for her apple pie, which I think is a sin. You've got to have cheese on apple pie. She just didn't think of it until the seven-year-old son stepped down from the table and left the room and returned with a small piece of cheese and put it on the dean's piece of pie. "Oh, that's wonderful. Where in the world?" He just went on and on about this piece of cheese, "Now where did you get that?" And he looked at the dean very proudly and said, "From the mouse trap." You do what you can. You do what you can.

Tex Sample taught at Saint Paul's Seminary, Kansas City. He's retired now. Something happened twenty years ago, he tells about it in one of his books. It happened November 1st. The year was 1991. It was at the University of Iowa. You may remember this tragic story. An alienated Chinese post-graduate student got a gun and shot and killed five people at that university, and then turned the gun on himself. November 1, 1991, Thanksgiving of that year. Three women served Thanksgiving meal to a crowd of 50 Chinese students on the campus of the University of Iowa. Three women served a meal, a Thanksgiving meal, to Chinese students. They did what they could. But that's not the whole story. Those three women who cooked that Thanksgiving dinner, each one of them had lost their husbands. Each one of them was a widow because their husbands were professors who were killed by the Chinese student who carried out the executions. They did what they could.

Wednesday of this week I got a flu shot. I went over to Walgreen's, I filled out the papers, I gave them my insurance card, I sat down in a chair, I started complaining immediately to the woman sitting beside me about how I hate nurses and doctors and shots, I'm deathly afraid of shots, and she was too by the way. They called my name. I went into a little room. Actually, it's a partition, and I'm standing there, and this nurse, who was quite small, looks up at me, and I'm standing there, and I start complaining about shots, I really don't like shots, and she says, "Roll up your sleeve." So I did. I said, "You know, I'm a complete coward when it comes to shots" and she took her needle, and I think she did this in purpose, she stuck it in front of me and squirted stuff out of it. Then when I wasn't looking, she up and stabbed me with the thing, you know, and I'm still complaining about getting shots, and I don't like shots, and don't you have a chair where I can sit down? I didn't even know I'd gotten my shot. She looked at me and you know what she said to me? That young woman, that beautiful young woman, doing her job, listening to me complain, she looked at me and said, "Are you preaching Sunday?" She did what she could.

The reason I like to read books written by Tony Campallo is he brings religion down to earth. Like the time he was in New York and the skyscraper began singing "You Are My Sunshine" before it was over, everybody in the elevator was singing "You Are My Sunshine." Or the time he went to the funeral of a friend, and went to the wrong mortuary, and was the only other mourner, other than the person who died's wife, who mourned the death of a perfect stranger. Or the time he was at the airport in Farmington, New Mexico. He writes, "I was waiting for a commuter plane to carry me to Denver, and then for my connecting flight back home, which was Philadelphia. I noticed an old woman sitting alone, and from her expression, she just looked like she was mad at the world, and so I made it, didn't have anything else to do, I decided I was going to go over and sit beside her and see if I could engage her in conversation and maybe try to get her to smile. And it worked. Not only did she smile, but she completely got to laughing, it was like an emotional dike had been broken, because once she started laughing there was no stopping her. And a couple other men in the small waiting room, we gathered together the two of us with this woman, three of us now, and we were all having an hilarious time. And then the awaited commuter plane finally landed, and the friend for whom the old lady was waiting disembarked, and the two of them hugged each other and said goodbye and left the terminal and drove away. I waited for the announcement of my flight," he said. "I happened to look out the glass door and here she came. She got out of her car and with measured steps she walked up to me and she said, "Mister, it was two years ago that my husband of 54 years died. You had no way to know that. And as I was on my way home I realized today was the first time since then that I have been able to laugh. And I just wanted to come back here and thank you." Tony did what he could.

Yesterday the CSU football team played one of the best teams in the country. I was there. Boise State, 63 points, Colorado State University, 12. And frankly the game was not as close as the score indicates. But those guys did the best they could. And let me tell you something. That band was tremendous at halftime. And the guy sitting beside me said, as he was watching the CSU dance team, "Those girls kick so high, I got a groin pull just watching them." Oh, it was exciting. We do what we can. Big things, sometimes. Headline makers, they take our picture for Style Magazine and put it in front of people. But most of the time, we find cheese, a little bit of it, and put it on an apple pie, or make someone laugh who's been sad for a long time. And then we see a time to live and a time to die, a touch of the eternal in the human heart. God wants us to be happy all the days of our lives. To want what we have and to do what we can and finally, I think even most importantly, to be who we are.

It was completely in character when Andy Rooney gave his last commentary on *Sixty Minutes*. When he finished it by saying, "In the years to come, you may see me at a restaurant eating a meal, and you may want to come over and say hello to me. Don't." He is what he is. It was Andy Rooney who said, "The best-selling books are cookbooks and diet books. Cookbooks show us how to make the food, diet books show us how not to eat it." Casey Stengel said, "The secret of managing a baseball team is to keep the guys who hate you away from the guys who are undecided." Rules to live by, maybe, but one of the most important is to be who you are. Like the woman who celebrated her hundredth

birthday was being interviewed by a TV reporter. "What was life like in your day?" She looked at the young reporter and said, with a polite smile, "This is my day." And that's as it should be. Old doesn't mean over the hill, it means filled with wisdom and present. The stereotypes just don't fit. We saw that last week, I think. They can tell us who they think we should be, and sometimes they're exactly right. But we decide our fate. They can predict what will become of us, and give us tips along the way, but at the end of the day, the road we will take is the one we will choose. They can give us a diagnosis, even, a sheet of statistics that will tell us with some precision what they think will happen to us, but we are marching to our own drum, and it may be a drum no one else hears. And it's not defiance against the norm that drives us, it's the declaration to the world that it's our life, and we will live it our way. To be who we are is to know who we are and to like who we are.

Some religious people, even, they come up and tell you that you ought to repent and find Jesus. And you look them straight in the eye and say, "I didn't know he was lost." Others may want to set an agenda for us by comparing us and our lives to lives of legends of the past, or performers of today, but the best measure of our life is the internal inventory we take ourselves. Or when you think about it, the heroes of our faith had heroic example to follow. Sarah the matriarch who laughed was like no one else. Jesus admired Elijah and John the Baptist, but he was different than any preacher, any one of them. And Paul the Apostle was a great evangelist they said, but the thing that you remember about Paul, he wasn't like Jesus, the way he preached, of John. He's best known for his letters, not his sermons. They were unique. They were authentic, and so are we. We are not a clone, a carbon copy, a fax, a replica, the second coming of someone who's already been. We are who we are. We perfect who we are. We find our limits. We push those limits. And sometime, to the surprise of others and our own amazement, we exceed them. Be who you are. Do what you can. Want what you have. And when that day comes, and it will, that you face the end of your life, and someone says, "I have to tell you, you're going to die," you look them in the face, and you say to them, "Yes, I know I'm going to die. But it's okay. Because in my time, I learned a most important thing. I learned how to live."