

Lent 4
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

March 22, 2015
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Time Management

Two people are sitting in the El Paso airport waiting for someone at 9 in the morning. The first one is awaiting the coming of his parents. He is in college, and this weekend is parents weekend. He loves his parents, but they can be a little cloying, a little over-protective, if you know what you mean. After all, he's a sophomore now. He's made it through one year of college all by himself, and he's a big boy. He doesn't really need Mommy and Daddy checking up on him. And—he hasn't cleaned his dorm room. He just didn't have the time, you know. He had spent the time he had set aside to clean his room having a brew or two with some friends. Friends are important, too, right? He's not really looking forward to this visit.

The second one is awaiting the love of her life. This loved one is a soldier who has been deployed. She has survived on Skype, phone calls and letters for 12 long months. She longs to hold and be held by the one she loves. And that one is on the plane, finally coming home.

The plane is due in 30 minutes. Now it happens that the parents and the beloved one are sharing a seat in the 9th row. We can say that when they deplane they will emerge at the same moment, the time between this moment I'm telling you about and the moment when each of these parties will meet the ones they are waiting for is for all practical purposes, the same. Yet for one it feels like it's far too short, and for the other it is interminably long.

In Anthony Bloom's little book, Beginning to Pray, Chapter 4 deals with management of time. When we say "management of time" there are hundreds of self-help books out there that tell one how to manage time, and these are important. We will certainly benefit from their advice on not wasting time, and therefore having more of it. But the good Archbishop is not talking about that kind of time management. He's talking about the experience above, only as it relates to prayer. He is talking about managing the tension between time in prayer and the rush of living. He deals with what both the college student and the lover face, for though their experiences are opposite, yet, both are distracted to the point of not living in the moment. True prayer, says Anthony, is about learning to stay in the moment.

Let's go back to the airport scene. The two experience the same amount of time, 30 minutes, plus the time to deplane. For one it is very short, and for the other it is

intolerably long. Yet time has marched along at exactly the same rate for both of them. The lover would wish to run toward the future. Bloom notes that this is foolishness. The future does not move away from us, it moves toward us, at the rate it will. He likens it to being on a train. If you take Amtrak from El Paso to Houston you sit still in your seat while the countryside moves past you. From your point of view, you are sitting still, and Houston will "arrive" when the time is right. Rushing to reach a future date quickly is like a person who moves from the back of the train to the front, running from car to car, imagining that in doing so he will make Houston arrive sooner. The future will arrive when it does. Hurrying does not make it arrive any sooner, and, as the college student might want, delaying does not slow it down. It will get here when it gets here. What we make of it when it does is what counts. What wisdom and compassion we will learn from it is what matters.

The same is true of the past. Running away from it will not make it be further away than it is. Hanging onto it will not keep it close. Worrying about it will not change it. It was what it was, and that's all it was. What one makes of it for living now is what matters. What wisdom and compassion can be learned from it is what counts.

What is time, then? We often think of the present as a thin vertical plane that moves along a line that extends into the past behind us and into the future in front of us. But when we see it that way we lose something vitally important. We make the present so thin that we can't live there. It becomes the point where the past and future meet. We live in the past, or anticipate the future. Time, says the Archbishop, is like an egg rolling across a piece of cloth. At any one time the egg is there. Where it has been is irrevocably past, and where it will be is only a guess. Where it is right now is what's important. We can only appreciate the egg's past and future because we are not on the cloth. We stand back and see the whole picture at once. The egg is always present to us, even though it rolls from place to place. This is how God sees us in time. From the beginning to the end, it's all in sight at once. All times are present to God.

So the present really is the MOST important piece of the picture, for the present is the only moment we really have. The sudden NOW, right NOW, is when we touch the eternal NOW of God. The Present is the place where time touches eternity. In the NOW we see ourselves for who we are, and we see God for who God is. Whatever is false is set aside as the truth of who we are meets the truth of who God is.

Jesus tells Nicodemus something interesting in the Gospel lesson today. Those who believe in the Son are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already. Judgment is not something that is in the future, it is not in the past, it is NOW. The truth is told in the eternal NOW of God. When we sit in communion with God in the

moment we know ourselves to be accepted. We are not condemned. Bloom tells the delightful story of an old Frenchman who would go to Church every day and sit for hours before the crucifix. The priest finally asked him what he was doing.

The man replied. "I see him, he sees me, we are happy!"

So how do we do this? Well, we just do it. We set aside a time in which to be present. If you're not used to this don't start out with protracted periods of time or you'll wear out and will quit. So give yourself 5 minutes. Can you sit still for 5 minutes? Some of us would love to, but when it comes to the doing it proves more elusive than one might think. The business of life comes rushing in on us, calling us to do this, or that or the other thing. Our Buddhist friends call this "monkey mind," always jumping from this to that and never settling down to the NOW. But in spite of the monkey mind, spend 5 minutes doing nothing...

Well, almost nothing to do. What you will do is pay attention to yourself and your surroundings. Here I sit, in my living room, with a cup of coffee and the furniture. I feel the weight of my body on the chair; I feel the air going into and out of my lungs. I note the temperature of the air, and any sounds that I hear, but I do not respond to them, I just take note of them. I take the experience of them and put them on the shelf of my mind. When the monkey mind breaks in, when the past breaks in with memories, take note, "I am remembering thus and such," and then place it on the shelf. When the future presses on you with things to do, take note, "I am being drawn to do thus and such," and then place it on the shelf. The discipline is to note, but not respond, to be aware, but not moved, to remain still in the midst of the changes of life.

Then, there is one more thing. Bloom tells the story of a woman in a retirement home who wanted some advice on prayer. She had been saying the Jesus Prayer for 18 years and didn't feel anything. He suggested something else.

"Get up in the morning, wash, eat breakfast, and clean up. Then sit in your room for 15 minutes. Take up your knitting, and knit before the Lord for 15 minutes. Just knit." She found that at first the silence was soothing. But then instead of an absence, it felt like the silence itself was something. And in the something there was a Someone. God is beyond all forms. Perhaps it is in the emptiness of silence, then, that we most clearly apprehend God's presence. And silence is only truly known in the NOW, where God lives.

Bloom tells the story of back when he was a doctor. He found that he was rushing between patients, always thinking of the people in the waiting room. He was so distracted that he often had to do the same exams two and three times, and ask the same

questions over and over again. By the end of the day he was exhausted and couldn't remember anything of what had happened that day. It dawned on him that he was being dishonest. The people in front of him deserved his whole attention. When he focused on them completely, as the task of the moment, and forgot about the others waiting for that moment. Not only did he only have to do his exams once and ask the questions once, but the exams were done in less time and of better quality, and at the end of the day he wasn't exhausted and he remembered who he had seen and why.

The discipline of being with God is a discipline of living in that moment of the eternal NOW we call the present. We practice in our times of prayer, sitting with God, and then we take that still presence with us through our day. When we do so we find that we live in God's presence wherever we go and whatever we do. What we do is more fulfilling, and done with excellence and skill, simply because we weren't somewhere else when we were doing them. And because we were in the present, the NOW, eternity has made itself known in our time, and our time makes a fitting offering to the God of our living.