

Tender Care: Keeping Time

*A sermon preached on Mark 1:29-39 on February 4, 2024,
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I.

Tick, tick, tick, tick.

I titled today's sermon "Keeping Time," with one memory firmly fixed on my mind. It is that of the wooden triangular box that sat on our family's piano, its lever ticking and tocking back and forth and its speed determined by the little weight on the end. It taunted me, that metronome. You see, my mediocre gifts as a budding pianist did NOT include a willingness and interest in scales and arpeggios and drills. That measure of discipline didn't capture my attention like a future dazzling performance of a dramatic piece did. Go figure.

Yet every young pianist has to do these scales. They're the building block of music-making on any instrument, these repeated runs through notes. They're to get your fingers used to the keys, your ears familiar with the harmonic structures of a given key, your eyes practiced on sight reading, your confidence boosted at the growth you experience, your muscle memory supple and strong, your inner clock moving along with the metronome just steadily, maddeningly, relentlessly ticking the beat to whatever tempo you'd chosen. When you mess up, you go back and do it again, and again, and again, and again until the errors smooth and the scales fall into the flow and you're off and soaring.

Yet it's that metronome that makes it happen, that creates the container for music to be made. Keeping time to maintain a set rhythm, beat, tempo. Keeping time to mark its elapsing. Keeping time to understand our lives within it. Not just how we commodify it, optimize it, scrapbook it, and

schedule it. Not how we save it, or manage it, or waste it, or track it. Not how we make it more convenient, or productive, or cram more in, or set better priorities. But rather, how we look at our minutes and hours, our days and seasons within the life and reach of God.

II.

Scripture gives us two glimpses of time's very nature: *chronos* and *kairos*.¹ Chronos time, from which we glean words like 'chronological' is the nature of time that ticks our watches and fills our day planners and shapes our days with meals and motions and meaningful relationships, labor and play and rest. But kairos time is different. It is time within time, when the world seems to stand still and the Spirit stuns you to make sure you're paying attention. The time you first felt the stirrings of a call. The time your newborn baby is placed into your arms. The time you finally had the conversation. The time you watched him take his final breath. Chronos, we can measure like a metronome. Kairos, we have to feel like a heartbeat.

Often when we look at Jesus' life, we do so within the spirit of kairos time, for his was a life whose living pierced the swing of time, bisecting our understanding of life before Christ and life after his death. We see how he announced a kingdom here but not yet, as he did just a few stories earlier in Mark, fresh from the waters of baptism, proclaiming, "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news."² We hear how his call of discipleship led to dropped nets, and abandoned water jugs, and oil poured lavishly over feet, and mats taken up to walk anew. We imagine how his death felt like time had stopped, and how his resurrection

¹ I'm so grateful for my dear friend, Rev. Scott Dickison, who I heard preach about chronos and kairos a few weeks ago on January 21, and whose gorgeous sermon called "Leaving Our Nets" inspired part of mine! You can read it here: <https://northminsterbaptist.org/sermons/>

² Mark 1:15

felt like life had just restarted, familiar yet wholly new. In so many ways, time for Jesus is kairos time.

Yet in today's story, Mark lets the kairos of Jesus exist within the chronos of hours, of movements of the sun and clicks of seconds that pass. Our text illuminates a day in the life of Jesus, if you will. Did you notice it? It's the keeping of that time we hear: healing Simon's mother in law after their hours in the synagogue, curing the sick of Galilee at sunset, praying alone at dawn, readying himself to depart hours later. Tick, tick, tick, tick.

And how did he spend his day?³

He spends meaningful time at home. Jesus' sabbath day looks remarkably similar to how yours might look today: going to church, then headed home. (Alas, there was no first century K&W Cafeteria for Jesus to have a nice Sunday lunch!) Jesus is there in the house with his friends and followers, and when he hears of the illness of Simon Peter's mother-in-law, Mark tells us "he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then her fever left her, and she began to serve." The word Mark uses for 'serve' here is *diakone*, which, if you remember from last Sunday, is the word in which we glean the service of Deacons to Christ's church. Perhaps Simon Peter's mother-in-law is the first Deacon, and her ministry begins at home.

We'll see Jesus bringing his capacity and calling to heal from town to town and village to village, but I love how local this particular healing story is. How intimate. How holy within the walls of a home, where life is lived and the holy can be found. This is good news for a fevered woman, but it's good news for all of us ever since, particularly those of us who think encounters with

³ With deep gratitude to Debie Thomas for her sermon, "A Day in the Life," about this text. Her framing of time was so meaningful to me, and shaped my conception of what this text calls forth for me today. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2897-a-day-in-the-life>

Jesus should be grand and “out there,” where we’re really doing something spiritual or in a place so different from our everyday lives. No, encounters with Jesus can happen right where our days begin: at home.

How did he spend his day?

He heals and liberates. Mark tells us that as night falls, the people arrive. Sabbath rules ended at sunset, you know, allowing what to Mark seemed like “the whole city” to congregate at Jesus’ door. Word was getting out, despite Jesus’ efforts to keep his work quiet. Their ailments bound them within failing bodies and outside of unwelcome communities, which makes Jesus’ healings all the more relieving. “He cured many,” Mark tells us, doing what he can when he can, and living within the limits of the minutes given to him. I have to imagine his presence was healing in and of itself, a gift to all who gathered in his presence to be seen and known and restored to hope.

How did he spend his day?

He rests in solitude and prays. It’s morning now, while it was still dark, and Jesus finds a quiet place alone to pray. He knows what we often forget: that the minutes and hours spent working and caregiving and peopling must be supported with minutes and hours spent alone with God. So vital is this practice to his ministry, prayer and solitude sustains it. Jesus cannot heal and teach and preach and turn over tables and reorient the world to God’s dream for it without some alone time! His insistence upon solitude gives ample room – permission, if you will – for the rest of us who might fill our minutes and our minds, all the while overlooking the necessary need for quiet, for prayer, for stillness in the presence of God.

How did he spend his day?

He knows when it's time to go. So desperate were Jesus' disciples to find him, Mark tells us they "hunted him down." For there were more needs to meet, more minutes to labor, more people to serve. Yet in his wisdom, Jesus sensed that the time had come to depart. That discernment enabled the good news to be extended, his life and ministry the true pattern for many.

III.

This walkthrough in a day in the life of Jesus isn't intended to be for us an exacting blueprint for how we're to spend our days. I doubt that many of us are curing fevers on a daily basis! I'm not suggesting a chronology where every minute should be detailed and spent just as Jesus, but rather his day offers a schematic design, a portrait of what hours and days can look like, how they too can hallow, or 'make holy,' the dailiness of living. Like how playing scales on a piano over and over again, and over time, makes a piece come to life. Like how making lunches and wiping noses and helping with homework and mending heartbreak raises a child. Like how gentle touch and listening ears and thoughtful consideration and sacrifice builds a marriage. For "how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives."⁴ How we shape our chronos becomes, of course, how we experience our kairos.

In his rhythms of work and play and rest, Jesus is showing us how to live and saving us by his living. His keeping of time helps our keeping of time. This is a sort of 'spiritual timekeeping,' as James K. A. Smith tells us, where "faithfulness requires knowing when we are in order to discern what we are called to."⁵ Time can no longer be thought of as a thief or as something that's just happening to us, tugging us unwillingly by the throat into each new minute. Rather, by considering the kairos within the chronos in light of Jesus'

⁴ Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*.

⁵ James K. A. Smith, *How to Keep Time*, p19.

living, we look at our own minutes with a renewed imagination for how one upon the other, tick tick tick tick, grows from clicks on a metronome to craft a rhythm of life.

IV.

In the days after Fred Rogers died, news reports were full of stories of his abundant kindnesses his whole life long, particularly the 33 years that he created the children's program, "Mister Rogers Neighborhood." One story from a Washington-based news reporter recalled the day Fred Rogers spoke for the prestigious National Press Club in Washington, the playground of dignitaries, senior staff of the presidential administration, and thought leaders of the day. Some reporters in attendance that day even joked that with "Mister Rogers" at the microphone, they'd surely be in for a 'light lunch.'

But according to this one storyteller, Fred Rogers began his speech with the acknowledgement of his audience, a room full of women and men whose achievements in journalism were among the greatest in their fields. Then he took out a pocket watch and said that he'd be keeping two minutes of silence, inviting all those relentless reporters to remember people in their past – friends, parents, mentors, teachers, coaches, and others – "who had made it possible for them to accomplish so much." And then he stood there calmly and quietly, his eyes on his watch while the eyes of those in the room darted around to see if he was serious. The seconds ticked away, but before Fred Rogers put up his watch, that one reporter recalled hearing a room full of sniffing, as these often-cynical reporters took those seconds to allow time to suspend, to reflect upon the people whose sacrifices and gifts made their

work possible, to make meaning of minutes. Kairos entered into chronos. And they all were left changed.⁶

V.

Friends, may the day in the life of Jesus give you courage and clarity for your living... where seconds become moments to remember, where the ticking clock gives tempo to your days, where moments become hours, which become patterns, which become seasons, which become a living, alive with the syncopations of grace.

Tick tick tick tick tick

⁶ Story as told by Tom Long in *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, p110.