

### **Sermon Transcript: It's About Time**

I've been thinking a lot about time this week. A very busy week. A lot of things that just kept making me think about time. It really began with Tuesday morning at 8:30 when Kay had her court hearing. For those of you who haven't been with us along the journey these last couple of weeks, for many years now, our church has partnered with Brightpoint Social Services. So, at any given time, we are partnered with 50 of their families that are in various forms of crisis or facing challenges. And our pledge to them is that we will treat you the way we treat anyone who's part of our church family. You're part of our church family for the time that we're in connection and relationship.

One of these families is an immigrant family who four years ago came into this country and the mom, during that first year, applied for asylum as she was supposed to, turned in all of her paperwork and has been waiting on the results of her asylum application. And the only thing that she had to do was report every so many months to the federal building as to her whereabouts and what she's been up to. And when she went in in March for her scheduled meeting, she was taken into custody and taken to a detention facility in rural Missouri to be held. And her family had no idea where she was. We were able to locate where she was being held and we have been working very hard since then to get her connected with some type of legal representation.

And through some experiences, we have learned that without legal representation, it's pretty well an automatic deportation. It kind of doesn't matter what your circumstances are as the cases that we've seen. So, we were coming up on a big deadline this Tuesday because at 8:30 a.m. she was going in front of the judge and we were at the last minute trying to help her secure a lawyer, some type of legal representation, because we knew how things would go if she didn't have that. The only representation we could get her—because we went through all the pro-bono lawyers that were provided to her on a list, none of them were either available or would take it; we went to several law firms trying to find someone, no one could pick up the case that quickly—we found one. And the online reviews were not great. But we just prayed and trusted. And when we got on Tuesday morning at 8:30 a.m., we had no idea if when they called her name if there would be any representation there for her.

### **Number 167: The Weight of the System**

I sat online because you could tune into these hearings. The detainees are in one facility. The judge is in Texas, lawyers are all over the country. It's a giant Zoom call. One at a time, they put one of the detainees in front of the camera, number 167, and then they talk about number 167. And I sat through several cases before they got to Kay's case. I listened to people plead to be let out because of the conditions. I heard one man say, "I've never been in trouble in my life and I can't stand this anymore." The time that they were spending there was overwhelming to them. There was one who said that he would like to have a hearing because he wanted his application for asylum to be heard. And the judge said, "Well, but if it doesn't go well, you could be in here for up to eight months, but if you're willing to self-deport, you can go out today." And he said he simply couldn't stand it anymore. And so he said he would find a way to get out of the country. Time again, I heard that eight-month number used to push people into choosing to fly themselves out of the country.

And then we got to Kay and I still didn't see any lawyer on that call. But thanks be to God, all of the sudden there was a voice that said, "I'm here to represent the defendant." And so she had legal representation and she was able to get what is the best possible outcome at this point which was a continuance so that that lawyer might have time to review the case. And on May 5th in all likelihood a decision will be made. That will be the one probably final hearing to decide if she can continue her asylum application or be sent out of the country with her 18-month-old son still here. Time felt really heavy, but I have to admit getting the best possible outcome felt really good in that moment. And I

took time to celebrate because that day was good news.

### **Marbles in a Jar: The Finite Nature of Time**

An hour later, I was at a 24-hour retreat with 24 of my fellow Presbyterian clergy buddies at Todd Hall in Columbia, Illinois. And we had time together. We had 24 hours together—time of just relaxing, of renewing, of encouraging. It was a fantastic time. It was really good to be together to share our highs and our lows with one another and that was life-giving. Got back into town and went over to visit with Kay's family and got to play again with her 18-month-old son. He is adorable, by the way. And he's got a good arm on him, too. So, with the blocks we were playing with, he could really get that thing going. For an 18-month-old, he has got a heck of an arm.

During that time, we were blessed to have a phone call from Kay, who was in the facility. She gets so many minutes to make phone calls, and she used that to call in when she knew we were going to be visiting. And she had just a few precious minutes to be able to speak with us. And she used that time to express how grateful she was to God and to say that no matter what happens, even if she's forced to go back, she knows that God will be with her. And she just is trying to trust God. And there may be a cynical voice in the room or even in your head right now that's like, "Well, of course she said stuff like that. There's the preacher who's trying to help her out. She's going to say all that God talk." But I'm telling you, she didn't need to do that. And it was a lot of effort going through a translator to get that communicated. And she has to pay for every minute that she uses to speak; her family has to put money into an account for her to be able to do that. So, this was precious time and she just wanted to express how much she was grateful to God and how much she trusted God. I can't imagine what time feels like in there or time away from your child over a month.

Now the next day, Pastor Alex and Rhonda, our director of Christian Discipleship, and I, we all went to a discipleship conference together in Nashville, Tennessee. Off we go on the road. I think about time because it was five hours of driving and some of us drive the speed limit. Sorry. Some of us get comments about our driving from our fellow colleagues. It was a wonderful time together. It was good for us together to experience that discipleship conference. It was good for us to be with these other Christian leaders that were talking about discipleship and emphasizing the precious opportunity that families have to be part of the discipling of their children.

There were just all these interesting little things that had to do with time that were part of it. One of the things—I met a guy who leads a ministry with fathers and every time there's a newborn baby, this guy gets a glass jar, a giant glass jar, and he fills it with 936 marbles. And he hands it to the father. And he says, "This is how many weeks you have with your child before they turn 18. And every week, I want you to pull out a marble. And I hope you'll replace it with an intentional memory that you try to make with your child."

They talked more about that precious time that we have for those of you who have children and feel like it moves by so quick. They said that by the time your child reaches the age of 12, you have already had 75% of the interactions you're going to have with them. And by the time they turn 18 and go off to college, you've had at least 90% of the interactions you're going to have with them. I can tell you as a parent whose youngest is 18 and away, that hit. I'm grateful for any amount of time that I've got one around at home. I'm grateful for any moment that I get and I realize that I am parenting in the 10% years. I think there's a lot of things we can look back on our lives and we can put timestamps on and if we're really present, we realize it's precious time that we're given whether it's with children or in a marriage or in a friendship or any kind of meaningful aspect of your life. We only have so much precious time.

### **The 50-Year Witness**

And then we come here to this Sunday and as we gather on this Sunday, we're talking about timing.

We have 50-year members. People have been part of this congregation for 50 years. I remember the first church I went to serve in Mount Vernon. This old guy said to me, he goes, "How long are you going to be here? Our last pastor was in and out in five years. How about you? Are you going to be here for 40 years?" And I said, "I hope I'm alive for 40 more years." The day that they welcomed me in as their new pastor, he jumped into the center aisle and grabbed hold of my hand to shake it and he went, "40 years."

Today's scripture passage comes to us from the gospel writer John, one of the last gospels that was written. We've been reading the last few chapters together over these last couple of weeks. And the funny thing is that John was also a 50-year member when he wrote this. He was with Jesus at the time of his active physical ministry on earth. And it's believed through various analysis that this gospel was written just a little over 50 years later. So, we celebrate these 50-year members, hearing a gospel told by a 50-year member of Jesus' original church.

And what he has to say in this gospel message, the last words that he has to say, is something that we should pay attention to because he's offered up this full witness of all the different signs and wonders that Jesus has done. And this gospel writer, yeah, he probably heard Matthew, Mark, and Luke's testimonies and went, "Yeah, but you forgot some things that I want to make sure people know about." And there's some things that we need to understand. He ends it by saying that, "Oh my goodness, Jesus did so much, so much more than what's written here. If we tried to write it all down, it'd be more than all the books of the world could contain."

That for that disciple in that precious little time that he had with Jesus, there was more than what he could possibly fully take in. And isn't that the way life is for us? When you look back upon your own life, it's just there's so much to take in—the good and the bad, the heartbreaking and the joyous, the precious minutes that we get, whether it's with children or with a friend or a spouse or a sibling. It's such a series of precious gifts and with it we receive signs of love, signs of what is true, signs of what is important, and then we figure out what our response is going to be to that and how we're going to live into that.

### **Living in the Witness of Today**

I think about those parents at this one particular church that every week pull out a marble and look at it. And I think about how each and every one of us is living with precious time. Not just if it's your blessing or experience to be a parent, but your time that you have just to be—what are you going to do with that precious gift?

I know sometimes that y'all come in here and you're looking for a sermon to carry you through the week, right? Or like, "Look, preacher, you don't even have to give me a week. Just give me something that'll get me through tomorrow." Well, you're about to get disappointed because I don't have that for you. I have a message for today. We can find ways to spin our lives getting so consumed with what's coming tomorrow, what's ahead, that we miss today. And so with all that you have in your life and all that is passed, I don't want you to look back on your life with regrets—to look back and use that to beat yourself up. I'm not going to do that as your pastor; I do that well enough to myself. I don't need to do that to you.

Instead of looking back and having regrets about how you've spent the precious weeks that you've had, days that you've had; instead of worrying about what might be or might come down the path, I'm going to invite you to live in today. I'm going to invite you to take this day to make a witness. I don't know that you have tomorrow and I don't know what that witness has been in days past, but we have today and with this day, how will you love? How will you show the kind of love that your God has for us? How will your life shine with some kind of light that's going to illuminate a path for someone else?

Because what I believe is that today there is someone who could be blessed by something that you do. I know in your life there is someone that you could call, that you could reach out to, that you could visit, that you could put aside the distractions of your life for even just a few minutes, and you could deliver a blessing in their life. You could deliver a witness to them that they are loved, they are cared for, and even more so, you have the opportunity to show them that God loves them, too.

Today, you hear this: Your pastor isn't telling you got to be a good Christian all week. I'm not even saying you have to witness all week. You don't have to proclaim the good news all week. You don't have to be loving and caring and merciful and graceful all week. I'm just asking—how about we hit it today? What if just today you took hold of? What would that witness look like for you? Who's the person who's going to get that phone call from you, that visit from you, that note from you, that hug, that precious gift of your time and your caring heart? Who's going to get that today? Because that's the gift that's in front of you right now. What will be your witness, your expression of your faith, your passing along of the love that's been poured into you? Where's that going to happen for you today? To God be the glory. Hallelujah. Amen.