

“REDEEM THE MOMENT”

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister
First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

As you exit Costco to the Post Rd, the AT and T store is on your right. The Double Tree hotel to your left. Does anyone know the driveway straight ahead? It's the world headquarters of Priceline.com, founded the year I moved to Ridgefield. And a neighbor within walking distance of my home was Jay Walker, its founder.

He excavated a nearby unoccupied ridge for his 24,000 square foot home. Just to carve out his driveway, it took 700 dump truck loads and cost a million dollars. The locals were not amused. It evoked all of the usual comments about invading McMansions ruining our New England charm. In those years leading up to the millennium, it was a sign of the times, wasn't it? A growing legion of enterprisers seized the new internet technology, saw the opportunity, created a response, poured energy into a product or a service, then hit a mother lode of prospecting, prosperity, opportunity. As for me, while his dump trucks ruined our country lane--better pay your taxes Jay--I admire innovators who dare to create something. It's so much easier to tear down than it is to seize the moment and build something.

As a pastor it took me a while to learn it's not just about good ideas vs bad ideas. Having the right idea at the right time and responding in the right way has always been key to making an impact. Paul writes about just this to Ephesus, "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time." Here Paul urges on us mindful living over coasting along. He commends wisdom over foolishness, inviting us to seize, claim, and work every opportunity.

Ephesus was a crossroads, a cultural superhighway, a center for religious cults and shrines. The allure of these mystery religions, these competing systems of belief, was strong. So Paul bids the small but sturdy church not to let the world outfox them. He didn't want the church left behind in the dust of the empire's highways and byways. *Make the most of the moment*, Paul urged, reminding us the ancient Greek perspective on time was expansive and broader than our own.

The Greeks had two words for time. "Chronos" is linear time, as we know it. Chronos is clock-ticking, deadline-meeting, infinitely-stretching-in-both-directions time. We measure life *chronologically* with our birthdays and anniversaries. But the Greeks have another word for time, the word Paul is using when he enjoins us to make the most of the moment. The word is "kairos". It refers to time as the opportune moment. When Paul writes, "make the most of the time," that literally means, "redeem the kairos. Move now in a way you likely will not be able to later. Seize the moment. Make hay while the sun shines. Strike while the iron is hot."

This word "kairos" slowly inches into the English language. Kinking the kairos, an actual phrase, is the art of achieving by leveraging rare chances that come. Kairos is time as the dot.commers understood it with their various start-ups. "The

old world is lazy,” Jay Walker observed, “...they want to copy—to take old ideas and put them in a new environment.” That is the voice of *kairos* talking. *Kairos* is also what Jesus urged in saying, “The kingdom of God is at hand. The time is fulfilled. The fields are ripe with harvest. You can’t put new wine into old wineskins.”

Living in time, as we all must, the way to live most wisely is to balance these two understandings of time off one another. Generally, we do quite well with *chronos*. Think of it, the Christian church has been around for 2,000 years. This local church enters its fourth century in 21 years. We are well-situated on the time line. We create calendars, meet deadlines, and show up on time when DST changes.

For the most part, the Christian church does better with *chronos* than with *kairos*. Maybe that is because having been around so long, we assume that we should go about most everything as we have always done it. We become *stuck* in time. And while the truth at the heart of our message—God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself—is one that will never change. Still, it is one thing to protect the timeless sanctity of Christ’s Gospel. That is good stewardship of what faithful generations before us have given us. It is something else entirely to say that the forms of church life that wrap themselves around this unalterable Gospel must never change. That is resisting growth out of fear. Can you hear the difference?

In 1985 when I became senior pastor of a large church, for example, I found myself serving many more members. I needed computer to become more efficient. When I requested a computer, they eyeballed me like some kind of space shot. “Why does he need a computer? The pastor who just retired never needed one. He is way out of line here. But since he is new, let us indulge him.” Never mind that PCs were appearing upon desks of most every workplace around Columbus. Arriving at my next church in 1993, they said the same thing. “Our retiring pastor never needed a computer. What kind of pastor are you?” I didn’t even mind them branding me as the “yuppie pastor.” I got my computer. It seems laughable now.

I groused to a pastor friend about this. He smiled and said it was nothing new. His father had been a pastor. Decades before his father urged the church invest in a new-fangled idea, *the telephone*. It split them in two. “Lazy pastor! Doesn’t he want to visit anybody? What use do we have for a telephone? That is stupid.”

We’re better at *chronos*--arriving on time for meetings or worship—than we are at *kairos*--recognizing how the fields are ripe with harvest, to borrow Jesus’ words. I invite you in this pause of our journey to ask: how can we redeem the moment? How can we recognize the things now invisible to us crying out to be done? I’m less talking about infrastructure—telephones and computers—than I am ministry.

We’ve built the foundation underneath doing this as hurts have been reconciled, as hands-on mission resurges, as extinct committees become fully functioning, as we balance our budget to pay as we go, as we grow fully staffed once again,

as new members have come to us and Darien sees us in an entirely new fashion. We are not the hurting church anymore, but the one where things are happening. You've showed me this by your brave response to the structural setback we face.

How can we redeem the moment? Surely not by organizing for ministry as we did for centuries when our relationship to the world around us was very different. Back then, Middlesex parish was the epicenter. Everything that unfolded here began in our Meetinghouse, where the whole town gathered for all of its business

Now, we are a quaint anachronism for the politics and economics of its activity. I sometimes use the word Meetinghouse, but mostly refer to it as our sanctuary. Yes, the town occasionally looks back to us and comes here, such as the Sandy Hook tragedy and the service we offered this town to assuage its deep grief. But mostly, it is *our* sanctuary, to baptize our children, to confirm their faith, and grow them into a version of being human beings that the world will often disagree with.

We're no longer the key institution where everything must begin to move forward. Our identity is less a spiritual institution at the center of the American experiment. We're now more like a vibrant movement to redeem this land and its people. We are now again like the church in the book of Acts, encircled by a Roman Empire. Our role now is more of a mission outpost to show that our worth does not reside in how much we have, in how powerful we can be, but as beloved children of God. Would you redeem the moment with me by living as a spiritual outpost to show others the ongoing life of God in Jesus Christ reconciling the world to itself?

What does this mean? Last week I sat with seven pastors. We heard of the North Haven UCC church as they reorganize themselves, moving away from a board or committee culture toward gathering themselves in nimble ministry teams. Teams trusted and empowered to do the work of the church instead of always having to check in to justify their existence and their ideas. I am not saying do away with accountability. Accountability is good. We'll probably retain something like current structures around building, property and finance. But can't we free ourselves up to be more nimble to reflect the times, a mission outpost, a people on the move? Our Care, Connect and Communicate group is already acting as a ministry team. I'm not saying, let's rewrite our Bylaws right now. It's a good idea, but the time isn't right. We must remain energized in new initiatives from amongst ourselves. Every good idea must also have a right time if it would truly redeem the moment.

So I get ahead of myself. It is still summer. We go so hard September through June that we still need to receive summer's gifts of rest and recovery. Maybe making most of this moment goes something like this. Have you taken a boat into Long Island Sound, turned off the running lights, and gazed up at the stars? Redeem the moment. Have you eaten a ripe peach, pausing to savor the sunset colors within, letting the juice run down your wrist? Redeem the moment. Have you listened to the sound of the wind blowing high in the leaves of the trees, its hushed whisper calling you, as they sway back and forth? Redeem the moment.

Have you laid poolside in a half-sleep, when muffled sounds seem a continent away, only to awaken warmed by the sun, and jumped into the water without hesitating? If God gives us a hot summer day, don't fail to redeem the moment. Amen.