
Title: To mark, not measure: Time as a gift of grace

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In his distinctive work, *For the Life of the World*, Schmemmann outlines an expansive view of sacraments and considers in his discussion the sacramental nature of ‘time’. Perhaps this is truer than we have realised. Our times and seasons are given as gifts to us from God (Schmemmann, p. 47), the original gratuitous giver. Allowing this understanding of time to reshape our experience of life could indeed be a powerful ‘means of grace’.

As far back as the creation account in Genesis chapter 1, we can see that God is preparing a world where there are “lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, ... [to] serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years” (NIV 1984). Jumping then to Ecclesiastes we have further reflection on the cyclical, seasonal nature of life. In chapter 1 Qoheleth muses that similarly to the way that one generation follows the next, the sun’s rising and setting, the movements of the wind and the water cycles are repeated performances. Here Kirk Patston suggests that rather than seeing this as ‘wearisome’ (Ecc. 1:8, the NIV’s language) perhaps the Hebrew’s *yā·gē·îm* - ‘full of labour’ - is closer to the truth. These ongoing cycles are integral to the functioning of God’s created order – indeed it is through them that God nourishes us with ‘crops in due season’. Ecclesiastes 3 insists “[t]here is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens”. Learning to identify and mark the different times so that we can respond with behaviour apt to the season seems implied here too. Time matters, Schmemmann calls it the “the only reality of life” (p. 47), but it is not an end in itself. Oft times, rather than live into it, we have become paralysed by time instead. We feel it “constantly dissolv[ing] life in a past which no longer is, and in a future which always looks towards death” (Schmemmann, p. 47)

and are gripped by this strange, paradoxical “anxiety of time” (Schmemmann, p. 47). Here Christianity offers an alternative; time as “a gift. And it becomes solution only as it is accepted as freely and joyfully as it is given” (Schmemmann, p. 47).

As much as ‘weariness’ is perhaps the wrong word in Ecclesiastes 1:8 – treating time as a commodity, “something that must be managed and not wasted” (Gaillardetz, p. 29) can very often lead to both disillusionment and fatigue. I think Jesus might be speaking to this very modern condition in Matthew 11:28-30. He seems to think that we need to learn again how to rest well (Schmemmann agrees, identifying our contemporary concept of ‘relaxation’ as both demonic and horrific! (p. 49) – but that resting still seems to involve some sort of ‘labour’, implied by the reference to His ‘yoke’ and ‘burden’. Just prior to this, Eugene Peterson includes an interesting little phrase that implies that learning to walk with and like Jesus will involve “[l]earn[ing] the unforced rhythms of grace”. This essay is my wondering out loud (so to speak!) about how intentional ‘rhythms of grace’ might help us to mark the times and seasons given to us by God as opportunities choose to walk with Him in gratitude with ‘quieted’ soul (Psalm 131:2). Instead of us ‘brooding’ over the fleeting days of our life, what would it look like to let God keep us glad hearted and joyfully occupied in our everyday lives (Ecclesiastes 5:20, NRSV)?

It begins with remembering. Over and over again, God’s people are called to remember. To remember His past faithfulness’s, His mighty deeds, His provision and care (for example Psalm 77). We are called to trust on account of His previously demonstrated trustworthiness. We look back so we can look forward with hope. To be God’s people is to be a remembering people. So then comes the question; what might help us to remember rightly?

The following sections outline different approaches or answers to the above question. Both have been described as ‘disciplines’ here and by other writers. Winner reminds us that although “[p]racticing ... spiritual disciplines does not make us Christians ... the practicing teaches us what it means to live as Christians. (There is an etymological clue here – discipline is related to the word disciple)” (xiii). The root for both is the Latin word *discipulus*, or pupil (Burton). Harking back to Matthew 11, Jesus calls those who would to come to Him and learn from Him, to be His pupils so they can “recover [their] life” (28-30, MSG). I hope to suggest some ways that we can “number our days” (Psalm 90:12) not in anxiousness about the ‘tyranny of time’, but out of a right reverence for the God who offers them to us as a good gift (Proverbs 1:7).

The discipline of keeping ‘liturgy’: rituals and repetition

Often times learning something requires practice, we need to repeat the new information or movement over and over so that it becomes second nature, automatic. Sometimes we even employ external aids to help us to remember; we write ourselves notes, or tie a string to our finger. The church has employed ritual and symbolic reminders for centuries as both teaching tools and memory aids. Kavanagh considers ritualisation a deeply rooted human behaviour we have developed to help us to “survive or, perhaps more modestly, to hold death and dissolution at least temporarily at bay” (p. 153-4). He suggests that incorporating patterns into our everyday lives helps to “reduce the raw and seemingly random stuff of experience to manageable portions ... [so we can] deal with reality, as it is encountered, by establishing” (Kavanagh p. 153) a set of coherent responses to our experiences. For the Christian believer, these ‘coherent’ responses are deeply rooted in the true Story of God at work in both history and our lives. Kavanagh does not equate ritual practices with “the ‘truth’ of things” (p. 153) but rather suggests that they are only a

formulated coping mechanism for the inextricable business of existence. Thankfully, the Christian community can approach the world of liturgical ritual with a confidence that these patterns can connect us to and remind us of spiritual *realities*.

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines liturgy as “a fixed set of ceremonies, words, etc., that are used during public worship in a religion” or “a religious rite or body of rites”. Here I will be considering the way intentional, repeated ‘ceremonies, words’ and ‘rites’ may also have a place beyond that of formal public worship in ordering personal spiritual practice. Although “[l]iturgy can be dull, and its dullness ... distracting ... roteness is ... also the way liturgy works” (Winner, p. 59-60). Rather than your every participation “in the life of God” (Winner p. 60) requiring creative energy, the use of set, pre-written prayers, structured reading plans and liturgical calendars can bring unexpected freedom. While we want to be wary of “the danger of liturgy for its own sake instead of God’s sake” (Fischer, p. 171), the real effort required to cultivate “a more alive ritual” (Fischer p. 183) can bring liberation from our emotions.

Unlike extemporaneous prayer and some forms of devotional reading, “[l]iturgy is not, in the end, open to our emotional whims. It repoints the person praying [or participating]” (Winner, p. 61) towards the ultimate realities that shape their current ones. This is not to discount times “when, in prayer, we can express to God just what we feel; but [to suggest that sometimes], in the act of praying, our feelings change” (Winner, p. 61). In a sense, when we choose to submit ourselves to liturgical practices that see us pray and read through the story of scripture regularly, we take the pressure off ourselves. Our drawing near to God does not require an emotional mustering of enthusiasm for the practice. When we choose to commit to morning and evening

prayers, fixed hour prayer, prayer books that follow the liturgical calendar or even reading the Moravian texts, we are choosing to immerse ourselves in a story that is bigger than us, to form Christ-centred habits. These liturgical-style set prayers and texts have been carefully constructed to allow the story of scripture to centre and shape the prayers and consciousness of those using them.

Winner speaks of an elderly man, dementia addling his mind, who, despite forgetting important relational information, can still pray the Lord's Prayer and say the Creed. Although no longer able explain the realities to which they speak, "[t]hose words have formed his heart, and – regardless of what he feels or remembers on any particular morning – they continue to form his heart still" (p. 64). She suggests that none of us participate in these spiritual disciplines on the basis of our understanding, but on the basis of the truth to which they refer.

We can also choose to allow other patterns and practices to become for us sacramental (with a small 's') – "religious sign[s] or symbol[s]" (EBO), things that point beyond themselves. If we are intentional, we can allow some of our day-to-day responsibilities to become 'sacred' rituals that speak to us of God's stance toward us, His provision and nearness. Albert Borgmann developed the concept of 'focal things' and 'focal practices'. Focal things require mastering of "a set of skills ... and practices [that] inevitably bring one into contact with the larger world of nature ... and with other persons" (Gaillardetz, p. 19). Consider activities like preparing a meal, gardening and chopping firewood to use as fuel for a fireplace. These activities are repeated almost daily – "appear[ing] time-consuming and routine ... predictable and generally devoid of excitement ..., we often consider ... [them] mere drudgery" (Gaillardetz, p. 24). However, they

are absolutely integral to “the rhythm for the life of the home ... determin[ing] family chores, the timing of meals, the gathering of family and friends” (Gaillardetz, p. 19). These are the cycles, that, though ‘full of labour’, nourish us. Gaillardetz suggests that these “focal things and practices invite us to abandon a largely instrumental view of our world and its inhabitants in favour of an attitude of ‘communion’ that draws us into attentive, respectful engagement with the larger world” (p. 26). As we participate in cycles that connect us to the world to which we belong with the intention of nourishing both others and ourselves, we are also drawn into communion with God – the giver of all good gifts. Ultimately it is He that “makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate— bringing forth food from the earth” (Psalm 104:14). Choosing to let the repeated actions of keeping our families (and ourselves) clean, warm and fed speak to us of God’s provision and our reliance on Him, our participation with Him can mean some of the more repetitious domestic activities might offer “grace and meaning in our daily lives” (Gaillardetz, p. 12). Even tidying our houses (creating order out of chaos!) and doing laundry (consider God’s intentions to wash us “white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18)) can point us to the work and story of God.

“Some few great spirits may be able to make the great intuitive leap to God, but for most of us the ascent is a slow and painful climb, one difficult rung after another. These rungs are formed of the familiar things around us, and ritual, like poetry, should take ordinary objects and through metaphor heighten their meaning to lift them above absurdity. Ritual can help us sense holiness, or the possibility of holiness, in the familiar” (Fischer, 176).

If we are to “abide in Christ” (John 15:4), it is crucial that we find holiness in the familiar. While not disregarding regular prayers or reading of scripture, maybe our spiritual life could also be enriched by physical reminders to lift our eyes (Long, p. 7). Perhaps the sun rising in the morning could be an occasion for us to celebrate that, ‘He (the ‘Son’ rather than ‘sun’) is risen indeed!’ Then night-time could provide us an opportunity to remember that “even the darkness will not be dark to You; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to You” (Psalm 139:11-12). Looking up to the hills on our physical horizon could be a clarion call to remember where our help comes from (Psalm 121). Choosing to let our physical, experiential existence point us to the spiritual realities that we trust shape our identity and our future hope is another way of letting ‘liturgy’ help us to remember (Long, p. 8).

The discipline of celebration: attending and delighting

While on one hand we want to affirm the power of daily rituals, we also know that “[a]ll days are not the same” (Brosend & Lott, p. 3). For centuries, people have known and noted the way that “some times [are] thicker with meaning, other times ... thinner” (Brosend & Lott, p. 5). It has long been the reality that “the meal-sharing time, gathering time, storytelling time, harvest time, rest time, remembering time, reunion time” (Brosend & Lott, p. 5) – in other words – the time of festival – helps people to know “their stories and their identities” (Brosend & Lott, p. 5). These times of celebration brought both hope and “joy into life, and [while] joy makes us strong” (Forster, p. 191), hope too gives strength to face the future (Brosend & Lott, p. 5).

Although historical Christian practice involved celebration of “the feasts and the seasons, the cycles of prayer, ... very real concern about the ‘*kairos*’ – the time of liturgical celebration”

(Schmemmann, p. 48), this is no longer true universality of contemporary Christianity. However it is important to remember, “that Christianity was born and preached at first in cultures in which feasts and celebrations were an organic and essential part of the whole world view and were a way of life” (Schmemmann, p. 53-4). They were not optional extras but an essential way of

“way of putting *meaning* into ... life, ... [a] feast was not a simple ‘break’ in the otherwise meaningless and hard life of work, but a justification of that work, its fruit, its – so to speak – sacramental transformation into joy, and therefore, into freedom”

(Schmemmann, p. 54).

Schmemmann posits that our understanding of the religious life has become increasingly spiritual, “a concentration of attention on matters pertaining to the ‘soul’” (p. 49) only. As this change has occurred we have been “tempted to reject time altogether and replace it with mysticism and ‘spiritual’ pursuits” (Schmemmann, p. 49). This disembodied perspective robs meaning from both our physical lives and experience of time. By both accepting our psychological and physiological predilection to ‘mark’ time and understanding feasts through the Christian narrative of “death and resurrection” (Schmemmann, p. 54) – thoughtful observance of celebrations has the potential to become an enriching practice. These patterns of celebration are buried deep in our human consciousness - we would do well to notice.

Here again the discussion needs to reflect the importance of cycles. Our measurement of time is cyclical; weeks follow months follow years – and on an organic scale, we speak of ‘life cycles’ and the seasons of birth, growth, maturation, new life, and death. Schmemmann tells us that feasts have been “always deeply and organically related to time, to the natural cycles of time, to the whole framework of man’s life in the world” (p. 54). If regular rituals were our way of ‘marking

time' (as in a march where the drummer stands still but continues the beat), then festivals become our way of 'marking the (specific) times' by designating some as celebratory.

Even on the most everyday level, we can affirm the "ordinary [moments of our lives] ... by setting [them] off now and again, and decking" (Howard, p. 32) them. A candle lit dinner, flowers at the table – eating together can become a daily celebration if we approach it as such. And if there is an "important event[] like finishing a major project, securing a job, receiving a raise" (Forster, p. 199), all the more reason to choose a favourite dish and make a toast that night!

Turning to weekly celebrations, we especially need to consider Sunday. Chittister explains, "Sunday, to the Christian mind, is a 'little Easter'. It is the collective memory of the moment when the tomb opened, empty of the death it promised, and new life began" (p. 33). It is not a "a 'sacred' day to be 'observed' apart from all other days and opposed to them" (Schmemmann, p. 52), but as symbolically representative of Resurrection Sunday, "the eighth and first day, it gave [and now gives] all days their true meaning" (Schmemmann, p. 52). The Christian community has long marked Sunday as a chance to remember the central event of history, the one that gives "[e]very day, every hour ... an importance, a gravity it could not have had before" (Schmemmann p. 52). We set aside time weekly to stop and remember "the sight of another way to be human" (Chittister, p. 33) – noting that "Sunday is ... the original Christian feast day" (Chittister, p. 37), not dissimilar to the Jewish practice of Sabbath. Although, perhaps the specifically liturgical manner with which many Jews observe the Sabbath make it more meaningful than much of what is done on Sundays within the Christian community. It is "a true cessation from the rhythms of

work and world, a time wholly set apart, and ... orient[ed] ... toward God” (Winner, p. 10). While, as Christians, we have the freedom to determine the shape of our weekly Sabbaths – learning how to form a weekly celebration that is both restorative and worshipful will take some discipline and discernment. Perhaps, like Michelle Garrels and her family, we may find that borrowing some Jewish practices can help to create a weekly rhythm of joyfully laying aside regular human labour as we mirror God’s rest on the seventh day and celebrate both His new Life and ours.

As we approach yearly celebrations it is important to acknowledge the way many have found “the liturgical year, relentless in its rhythms and cycles, [to] bring[] new depth and meaning to the recurrent patterns of [their] own” (Chittister, p. 43). Those who have overlayed the civic calendar with that of the church do so in an “attempt to live the life of Jesus over and over again all the years of [their] lives” (p. xvi). Liturgical spirituality seeks to see us grow, not only chronologically but also spiritually year by year. Here aspects of the spiritual life are connected metaphorically with the physical seasons to enrich these with deeper meaning (Schmemmann, p. 56). The physical seasons “[t]he dark and the light, the springtime and the fall, affect us more than we articulate” (Lott, p. 5) – despite varying geographically. Whether or not we choose to celebrate the seasons as directly linked to spiritual events, they do offer us opportunity to celebrate God’s provision as well as our deep embeddendess and reliance on this ecologically complex creation. In her book *American Indian Food*, Berzok tells of the way that Indian communities celebrated both planting and harvest times. We live out of a different story, but should be no less thankful for new season cherries or strawberries! What if we too let the agricultural rhythms that nourish us remind us to stop and celebrate – thanking God for what He

has given us? This in a sense, seems to be what Schmemmann explains we were made for as “the priest[s] of a eucharist, offering the world to God” (p. 17) in worship. Forster calls us to “[r]evive the May Day celebrations. Go pick flowers and deliver them to your neighbours and friends. Rejoice in the beauty of colour and variety” (p. 200). There are thousands of ways these ideas could be adapted to bring meaning to the seasons that God has blessed us with.

Whether or not you choose to follow the liturgical calendar, as Christians, we are the true heirs of cultural celebrations like Christmas and Easter. Why not “take advantage of the festivals of [both our faith and] our culture and really celebrate” (Foster, p. 199) them? They do not have to be defined by “crass commercialism ... if we decide that we do not want it that way” (Foster, p. 199). Intentional celebration brings richness to our yearly lives and can become a way of marking “the turning of the years” (Chittister, p. 1) because we all need “real festivals, festivals that tell the truth and not pretence, amid deep, bone-rejoicing, hope-producing celebration” (Lott, p. 6).

We also need to take the celebration of birthdays more seriously, “[b]ecause to celebrate a birthday means to say to someone: ‘Thank you for being you’” (Nouwen, p. 18). Not only do “we lift someone up and let everyone say: ‘We love you’” (Nouwen, p. 18), but we “rejoice [and recognise that t]his is the day that God has made for us to be and to be together” (Nouwen, p. 19). Family events are a rich source of occasions for “celebration and thanksgiving. This is particularly true of the various rites of passage in our culture like birthdays, graduations, marriages, anniversaries” (Foster, p. 199). As we celebrate, we honour God, thanking Him for

both the people He has given us to share our lives with and the opportunities and seasons He presents us all with.

The story that we are learning in those repeated rituals needs to be celebrated. Choosing to delight in both important occasions and small blessings helps us to attend to the lives of those around us and the creation we are a part of. We honour God's story, His creation and work in our lives by being a people of celebration. We are called to be a remembering people and then a rejoicing people (Philippians 4) – “after all, Jesus rejoiced so fully in life that he was accused of being a wine bibber and a glutton” (Forster, p. 196). The work of His Spirit in us should likewise bring forth right joy and celebration (Galatians 5:22, Forster, p. 191).

In Conclusion:

We are a people who exist in time - time that repeats while moving forward. On one hand, we could say that from a spiritual perspective ‘everyday is Easter, everyday is Christmas – God is with us and He is the risen King’. However, without pervasive personal spiritual maturity this can in effect “relegate[] the perfection of joy to the inaccessible future ... [making] all human life an ‘effort’, a ‘work’” (Schmemmann, p. 55). To this Schmemmann says, “God revealed and offers us eternal Life ... in the midst of time – and of its *rush* – as its secret meaning and goal. And thus he made time, and our work in it, into the *sacrament of the world to come*” (Schmemmann, p. 65). Life then, as well as life now, is about being found in and with Christ (John 15:4, Revelation 21:3). Truly, as children of God, we are always ‘in Christ’ – but because of our physical, time bound existence and our finite memory, treating every day of this life the same probably will not work for most of us. Someone once said that you can only learn theology, what

God is like, as fast as you can walk. Perhaps we will best grow into the ‘unforced rhythms of God’s grace’ to us by ‘enforcing’ some rhythms that help us remember Him and His story.

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