

Time to Change

Here we are on the First Sunday of Advent with Christmas only four weeks away. So I think it fitting to begin this sermon with an excerpt from one of the delightful books of the holiday season, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. You remember old Ebenezer Scrooge – that miserly, mean-spirited businessperson whose life passion was making and accumulating and hoarding money, though he spent little, even on himself.

One Christmas Eve, exactly seven years to the day, that his business partner Jacob Marley had died, Scrooge was in his house all alone, when he heard clanging chains. The sound grew louder and louder until a pale, sickly figure stood in his room. It was Jacob Marley, or should I say, Marley's Ghost. He was wearing the chains he had forged in life – the chains of greed and selfishness and indifference to human suffering.

On this Christmas Eve Marley's Ghost is on a mission: to warn old Scrooge that his life was headed for the same fate that he now experienced. The Ghost laments to Scrooge his own failures: that he did not use more wisely the life that he was given.

“But you were always a good man of business, Jacob,” Scrooge replies.

“Business,” cries the Ghost. “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!”¹

Let me ask you a question: What is your business? How would you characterize your life? How are you using your one and only life? Where is it currently, and what is its future direction?

There is urgency about this question because time is running out. In fact, there will come a time when there will be no more time. When the life we have lived will be over, and then we will stand before God and give an account of ourselves. That's why, as much as I have read and re-read *A Christmas Carol*, I can always bear to read it again. The story prods me to think about how I am using the limited time that I have on this earth.

Time is the one thing we can never get back. Once it is gone, it is gone forever. I can never get back yesterday. I can only live today and anticipate tomorrow. I can lose my money, only to regain it again. I can lose a friend, only to make another friend. I can lose my job, only to find another job. But when I lose time, I lose it forever. I can never regain what I have lost. I can never take back the hours and days that are gone. Time is precious precisely because it can never be repeated.

I remember speaking with a parishioner several years ago about the loss he was feeling during the holiday season. He was successful in business and respected by his peers. But the past year had deeply dispirited him. In February his younger sister died, and four months later, his mother died. He said to me, “Moments like that put things in their proper perspective. We have a finite amount of time, and when you realize you don’t have as much time as you thought, you begin to think: what would I like to do with the rest of my life? Am I going to wait for it to happen, or go out and do it?”

This man had been considering starting a charitable foundation, or even getting more involved in the church, but he had delayed, procrastinated, as one thing after another distracted him. But the death of the two people he loved prompted him to reconsider his life and make changes. In the end, he became a happier, more contented human being.

We can take a lesson from that man. Try to live as if every day counts. God could break into our world at any moment. Jesus gives us good advice. He bids us: “Keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.” St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans tell us: “You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers...” You and I are to live as if the Lord could come at any time, even when we least expect it. So we live conscientiously, honorably, and faithfully, ready to meet the Lord at any time.

There is a story of an eclipse that befell colonial New England. As the daylight sky became darkened, panic fell in the Connecticut legislature that was in session at the time. Several legislators moved for adjournment thinking it could be the end of the world. But one of them said, “Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my

duty. I move, sir, that candles be brought and that we continue with our business.”²

I like that attitude. When Christ comes, shouldn't we be found doing our duty? We should use our time wisely, making life meaningful and working to improve the world.

You may recall that before he became President, Jimmy Carter wrote a best-selling book. The title of the book was based on an interview he had with Admiral Hyman Rickover, the father of our nuclear Navy. Carter, a graduate of the Naval Academy, wanted to be in the nuclear submarine program. He had a three-hour interview with Admiral Rickover that covered strategy, tactics, physics, literature, and history.

The interview was going well, until Rickover asked, “Where were you ranked in your class at the Naval Academy?” Carter, with some pride, responded, “I was ranked 59th in a class of 840, sir.” Rickover did not congratulate him, but asked another question, “Did you always do your best?” Carter, truthfully admitted, “No, sir, I didn't always do my best.”

Rickover didn't say anything and just looked at Carter for a long time before asking one final question, “Why not?” Then he stood up and walked out of the room.

Jimmy Carter would never forget that question, which became the title of his book, *Why Not the Best?* This question became the guiding star of Carter's life, as it should be for us.

Did I do my best? Am I giving my best? Am I really trying? The world around us may be filled with chaos, confusion, heartbreak, and tragedy. All we can control is that we do our best, to use our time, talent, and treasure to make the world as best we can, as decent, civil, and compassionate as we can. No one can ask any more of us, not even God.

Think about it. We pass through life only once, so shouldn't we put all our effort into making the world a better place by our living in it – to leave behind a little more kindness, a little more decency, a little more compassion, especially for the weakest and most vulnerable among us?

Through my experiences as a priest, I have realized that true happiness comes from caring about others, being compassionate, and responding to the needs of people around us. There is a central Christian truth: abundant life comes to us on the way to someone else. If we keep it to ourselves, we die. If we share it with others, we live. Salvation is always received by passing it on to someone else.

That's what happened with old Scrooge. One Christmas Eve he saw himself not as the man he was but as the man he could be – joyful, generous, kind, and compassionate, with a love for life and a heart for people. Indeed he became that man. Dickens writes, “He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the old good City knew...”

Dickens concludes his story by saying: “...it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!”³

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Text – Matthew 24:36-44; Rom. 13:11-14
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1. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (A Signet Classic, 1984) 51.
2. Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983) 242.
3. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 138.