**WITHOUT DELAY**

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Barbara E. Davis Sunday, May 12, 2019 (Mother’s Day) Scripture: Psalm 23; Acts 9:36-43

Last week I was visiting one of our members in her relatively new living situation in long term care. Toward the end of the conversation, she asked me to write down my number at the church for her. She took a small but sturdy devotional book out of her nightstand drawer and told me to write the number in the back. Before she handed me the book, she took a large index card out of the front and said, “ah, yes, I use this most days to decided what I am going to do.” On it was a grid I had seen many times, yet not for a number of years. It was what is commonly referred to as the Eisenhower matrix, or the urgent vs. important matrix.

Many of you are probably familiar with this time management tool. It’s a four-quadrant grid. In the top left-hand corner are things that are urgent and important. In the bottom left are tasks that are urgent but not important; the top right are things that are not urgent but important, and the bottom right is not urgent and not important. Eisenhower was apparently masterful at time management and supposedly once said, “The most urgent decisions are rarely the most important ones.”i I suspect many of us would agree with that assessment. Urgent and important tasks are those that relate to issues in crisis, pressing problems and projects with a close deadline. These things should be done immediately. The urgent but not important are tasks that are essentially interruptions and should be delegated. Not urgent but important items are those which involve preparation and planning, new opportunities and relationship building. These are tasks that one should plan *when* to do them. In the not urgent and not important category are busy work, time wasters, things that can be done later.

I had some fun at the beginning of this week and put my lists into these categories, just to test it out in earnest and not just theorizing in my head. From this experience, I must admit to certain biases. First, I encountered the difficultly of my perceptions verses the perceptions of others of what is important and urgent for me to be doing. Most of you can probably relate. What if I recognize something is important but I don’t think it’s as urgent as someone else does, do I just tell them, “listen your email is in quadrant 3, you’ll have to wait a while”?

Then I wondered, if others were using this tool as well, how would I feel if my question went into the not urgent/not important category? When I was sorting my list, I noticed that I was trying to cram most of my list into the top two quadrants – important/urgent and not urgent/important. I didn’t put anything in the bottom two boxes, I even hesitated to write anything in those boxes, the not urgent/not important box being the worst. Of course, those things are supposed to be listed so you know to delete them and not worry about doing them anymore.

This exercise got me to thinking about how we organize ourselves and our lives for discipleship. What is the last urgent AND important thing you did? Answering an email? Checking your text messages? Getting your children a snack? Filling out school paperwork? Going to the doctor? Reading the news? Getting one last bit of work done, before you fall exhausted into sleep? Eating dinner with your family? Setting up a lunch date with a friend? Calling your mother?

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The question of what is urgent and important in the early church is a key component of the stories we hear in Acts. In today’s passage that Mark read for us, the complicated nature of those choices leaps out at us from story.

When the disciples who are friends of Tabitha have cleaned and prepared her body after her death realize that Peter is nearby, they go to him. Peter is not far from Joppa where Tabitha lived and where her body is resting in death. They find him and say, “Please come to us without delay.” Without delay. It’s pretty clear it is urgent and important. Yet, Tabitha is not sick, she is already dead, her body having passed from this life into the next. What are her friends expecting from Peter?

Most of the healing stories we hear are framed to fit in this upper left quadrant of our discipleship matrix, but why this one? Were they asking him to come and pray with them, to offer comfort? Were they asking him to come and raise Tabitha from death, as he does? What did he think they were asking? And what were their intentions?

It’s *not* very clear. There is a prism of answers that I could make a case for each side. The traditional interpretation would be that this story is showing Peter’s growth and leadership, that raising Tabitha put him in league with the prophets Elijah and Elisha in the Hebrew Bible, and Jesus, all who raise people from the dead. Oddly, none of those other stories present this urgency. In fact, the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4 will not send word ahead to Elisha about her son’s death but goes to him herself, even though it lengthens the journey and the time her son is dead. Among those who Jesus raises from the dead, the son of the widow of Nain, Jairus’ daughter and Lazarus, time is a factor in the latter two. Jairus approaches Jesus about his daughter while she is still sick. As Jesus is making his way to her, someone from the leader’s house comes and says that she has died, and adds, “do not trouble the teacher any longer.” (Luke 7:41-42, 49-56) Jesus, of course, goes anyway, and raises her up. In the story of Jesus raising Lazarus (John 11), you might remember that Lazarus’ sisters are very angry with Jesus for not coming sooner, when in fact, he waits for several days before he goes to Lazarus. He says so that God will be glorified, in other words so that people will really believe Lazarus is fully dead and Jesus is able to bring him back to life. It is important, but not urgent.

Over and over again the disciples deal with this internal conflict of not only how to respond but *how quickly* to respond. It was a type of conflict they watched Jesus deal with repeatedly. How often do we hear the words on Jesus’ lips, “my hour has not yet come” or when he gets a similar request to come to the bedside of Lazarus who is sick unto death.

Jesus waits before he goes to him. Perhaps Peter knows something valuable. Maybe Peter knows that discipleship works on a different matrix. Our discipleship is not about sorting tasks or even completing tasks, in fact, our discipleship is about recognizing the importance of all four quadrants of the Eisenhower matrix, because discipleship is a way of living, it is the whole task list.

Religious educator, Dr. Courtney Goto captures this tension beautifully when she says, “Paradoxically, Christian communities are sometimes playing *in* God’s new creation, which has both a ‘not yet’ and ‘already’ dimension.”ii As a people following in Tabitha and Peter’s footsteps, we know that paradox of trying to respond without delay in a *not yet* and *already* world.

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Dr. Goto’s work in this book is a theological argument for something that many of our mothers, including my own, told us with some frequency, “go outside and play.” Her book is titled, “The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Leaning Into God’s New Creation.” We don’t talk about the playfulness and creativity of discipleship nearly enough, we try to force it too much into the two quadrants of the Eisenhower matrix. Sort of like that bumper sticker cliché, “look busy, Jesus is coming.” Discipleship is always urgent and important, but is it joyful? Can we allow ourselves to learn from our playfulness, from our creativity? In religious education, we call this the curriculum of leisure, and it is as vital a piece of our learning as any other part of who we are as disciples.

Dr. Goto makes the joy of discipleship very present by referring to us over and over as “children of God” – language we’ll use again very soon in our baptismal liturgy. But it’s not just imagining ourselves as children, it’s imagining our work together as disciples as something we WANT to do without delay, but we achieve that by realizing that discipleship has all the elements, it is urgent and important in all their dimensions, but it is in the tension of “not-yet” and “already” where our discipleship takes root. Dr. Goto describes this paradox a little more:

*At times, the Bible refers to the kingdom of God, which resonates with the notion of the new creation. One of the Pharisees asks Jesus when the kingdom of God is coming, and he replies, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” A helpful way of imagining how the kingdom could be “among” the faithful already is to fathom that the kingdom of God is also “within.” In other words, it is within the capacity of human beings to constitute the kingdom of God by virtue of something innate that God has granted – being children of God*. *This “not yet” and “already” dimension of revelatory experiences are theological ways of referring to what acting or believing “as if” is also attempting to describe the language of playing.iii*

In responding to Tabitha’s friends, Peter is acting as if he already understands the role of discipleship and what is already and what is not. In fact, the disciples are far from having any particular wisdom about the formation of Christianity at this point in the first century. Acts is the story of how they are figuring it out, how they are fighting, learning, playing in their discipleship in an effort to expand the ones who are followers of Christ.

In Acts, as much as any place in the New Testament, the disciples are “not-yet” and “already.” The “revelatory experiencing” of that paradox is what Peter and Tabitha’s friends express so well in their actions. By Peter’s willingness to just pick up and go with them without delay, not knowing what their expectations are or what will happen, it allows him to be present with all of them in ways that perhaps they could not have imagined. In their grieving, Tabitha’s friends create an opportunity for the unexpected. There is little doubt that God’s new creation is among them.

Sometimes we hold too firmly to one part or the other of our call to discipleship. We are not yet disciples in so many ways, and we are already disciples in so many others. We want to assert our already qualities, the things we do without delay and assert our point of view. In other ways we lean into the “not yet” part of discipleship. We tell ourselves and others, we aren’t ready for that yet. In fact, the joy of our discipleship is that it is a vocation where we are always *already* and *not yet* people. There are things we can already do. There are things we can’t do yet. Being already and not yet people, we have a unique ability to hold the joy and pain of the world

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in our hands and in our hearts. We lean into our discipleship as if the new creation is within us. Like Tabitha, like Peter, like the disciples around Tabitha, we don’t know what to expect next. But we do know this with confidence: there is joy in both exploring the not yet and embracing the already, in both, our discipleship is all it needs to be.

i Krogerus, Mikael and Roman Tschappeler. The Decision Book: Fifty Models for Strategic Thinking. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2016). p. 10.  
ii Goto, Courtney. The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Leaning Into God’s New Creation. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016). p. 33.

iii Ibid.

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