

“The Gospel in a Minute”

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Minute waltzes. Minute timers. Minute steaks. Our “hurry-up” culture is intrigued by what we can accomplish in a minute.

Let me disappoint you now: this sermon will not be a minute! But this morning we do have “the Gospel in a minute.” So succinct a rendering is this Good News in Jesus Christ, that it gets shown on placards at football games. So important a rendering is this, that it is one of only four scriptures I require to be memorized by my Confirmation students. For those with stopwatches, clear them to zero. Ready, go!

*For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son,
That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have
everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to
condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be
saved.*

John 3:16-17

Actually, more like 25 seconds! This matter of time is central to my thoughts because I hear from many of you, and know in my own life, the scarcity of time. This is, of course, a matter of perception. Although none of us knows when our days will come to an end, until that time we all have the same amount of time: 60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes in an hour, 24 hours in a day, 7 days in a week, 52 weeks in a year. It is what we do with that time, and what others ask of us to do with our time, that influences whether we believe we have enough or not.

You have come today, investing at least an hour and for some, several hours, in the worship of God and the life of this church. I presume that you do so, at least in part, to draw close to God. That is no small thing and I thank you for it. But I would be dishonest if I said it was enough. An hour or two with God is not enough to cultivate a relationship with the Beloved, any more than an hour or two a week is enough for you to cultivate a relationship with your beloved.

We can also have enough time but use it poorly. The Israelites had plenty of time: 40 years of it, two generations, wandering in the wilderness, trying to enter the promised land. The recurring refrain of their relationship with God sounds like a country song with everything except the dog and the pick-up truck. God, you done us wrong.

In fact, I don't have an easy answer for this passage from Numbers that describes God sending poisonous snakes among the impatient people. It's true that God gave Moses the antidote: to make a bronze serpent on a pole that one could look upon and live. But it's also true that God sent the snakes—at least that how the writer of the Book of Numbers saw it—because of the people's back talk. Let's just say if "then" was "now" I'd have been bitten and dead a long time ago. In my self-pitying moments, when misfortune comes my way, I identify with one of my step-son's classmates. Somebody took her eraser at school and she, a kindly and generous soul, cried out to them in frustration, "*All I do is give! And you would take from me?*"

God is no stranger to that kind of despair. That's why the "Gospel in a minute" begins with a reference to the Israelites: "*And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*" Jesus would be lifted on the cross as an antidote to our impatience and our rebellion. At least part of what brings us here is the yearning for that antidote to our impatience and our frenzy, a yearning for God, for faith, for community.

From before the time of Jesus, people of faith sought this God through prayer. Jesus prayed. Jesus taught his followers to pray with the model prayer, the Lord's Prayer. How's *your* praying going?

I recently reminded our bishop, Bishop Jane Allen Middleton, that she helped me through a prayer desert after my first neck surgery over 20 years ago. I lamented that I was discouraged in disproportion to my physical challenge. She asked me how my prayer life was. I said it wasn't good. She asked me when I prayed. I said "When I run." And then the light dawned, and I had to learn a different way to pray as I recovered.

So in today's Grace Notes I've provided a resource. The prayer guide is the last two pages, and if you don't want to take all the notices you can tear off that one page and take it with you. We use this prayer guide on Good Friday and at other times. I recently gave it to my fasting covenant groups. It is nothing special—I can say that because I wrote it—but it is one way of jump-starting or strengthening our prayer life.

I exhort you in love to take a few moments each day, at whatever time works for you, to establish the habit of prayer. If this guide can assist that, to God be the glory. But whatever you do, draw close to this God whose love on the cross shows the depth of his love for us.

*For God – the greatest Lover
so loved – the greatest emotion
the World – the greatest place
that He gave – the greatest impulse
His only begotten Son – the greatest gift
that whosoever – the greatest number
believeth in Him – the greatest trust
should not perish – the greatest hope
but have everlasting life – the greatest promise.*