

8 Epiphany Yr A, 27/02/2011
Matt 6:34
Rev. Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson, Chaplain,
The Good Samaritan Society's South Ridge Village,
Medicine Hat, Alberta

"Live today"

You have likely heard the familiar adage: "Those who fail to plan, plan to fail." The saying presupposes that we need to be thinking about and planning for the future. Our society emphasises that a lot these days, it seems to me. We are constantly told by a variety of folks, including our family members; that we need to be intentional about planning for things like our future retirement. I wonder, though, can we focus so much on the future that we're robbed of the beauty and fullness of today, the time right now in the present? In contrast to this adage about future planning, is another familiar catchy adage: "Today is a gift from God, that's why we call it the present." I like that.

I think Jesus was very much for enjoying a full, abundant life in the here-and-now present tense; and so today, in his continuation of the Sermon on the Mount, he teaches his disciples and us not to worry about the future. Rather, make the most of today.

There's a beautiful story about Jesus' teaching us to live today in the present time, it comes from Leo Tolstoy, and goes like this:

There was once a king who felt the pressures and demands of his office. One day he said to his wife, "If only I could determine which people and which affairs of the kingdom were the most important, I could use my time better and thus be a more effective king."

"There are many wise people in the kingdom," the queen said. "Consult with them."

And he did. One by one, politicians, scholars, and advisers were invited to the palace to give advice to the king. Some suggested that his clergy were most important. Others insisted that he focus his

attention on the military, while still others urged him to give preference to the educators. Each argued hard and reasoned well. The king remained confused.

Once again he sought advice from the queen. "No two groups agree," the king told her. "How do I decide to whom I will listen?"

"Find a neutral party," she suggested. "Find someone who is not beholden to the military, the scholars, or the church. Perhaps it is time to visit the wise hermit."

The king agreed. Accompanied by his bodyguards, he set off to find the wise hermit who lived deep in the woods, a half day's journey from the palace. The hermit, it was rumoured, would only receive the poor. Therefore the king put on humble clothing and before reaching the hermit's cell, got off his horse, left his bodyguards behind, and continued on foot alone.

When he reached the hut, the king saw the hermit digging a garden. The hermit paused long enough to greet the stranger and then proceeded to dig again. The hermit was thin and weak, and he breathed with difficulty as he plunged his spade into the earth.

The king approached the hermit and said, "I have come, my wise friend, to ask for answers to two questions: Which people are essential? Or to put it another way, with whom should I spend my time? My second question is, what affairs are most important, and should therefore be taken care of first?"

The hermit listened to the king intently. Then, without answering, he started digging again.

"You are tired," the king said. "Give me the spade. I'll work for you."

"Thank you," said the hermit, handing over the tool.

After digging for nearly two hours, the king stopped and repeated his questions. The hermit did not answer, but stood up and reached for the spade saying, "You rest now; let me dig."

The king refused and continued to work. Two hours passed, and the sun began to set behind the trees when the king thrust the spade in the earth and said, "I came to you for an answer to my questions. If you can't or won't answer, say so, and I'll go home."

"Look," the hermit said. "Someone is running here. Let's see who it is."

The king looked to see a bearded man running out of the woods, clutching his hands to his stomach. Blood flowed between his fingers. He ran straight toward the king. Before he reached him he stumbled and fell to the ground moaning feebly.

Quickly the king and the hermit unfastened the man's clothing and discovered a large wound in his stomach. The king washed it as well as he could and bandaged it with his own handkerchief and one of the hermit's clean rags. When the blood kept flowing, the king removed the blood-soaked bandage, and then washed and bound the wound again several times.

Finally the flow of blood abated. The wounded man awoke and asked for water. The king brought fresh water and helped the man to drink it. Meanwhile, the sun had set and the air turned cool. The hermit and the king carried the wounded man into the hut and laid him on the bed. Then the king, exhausted from the unusual effort of the day, fell asleep.

When he awoke in the morning, the king looked up to see the bearded man lying on the bed, looking intently at him. It took a few moments for the king to remember where he was and the identity of the man in the bed.

"Forgive me," the bearded man said in a weak voice.

"I don't know you and have no reason to forgive you," said the king.

"I know you," the man confessed. "I swore to take vengeance on you for having executed my brother. I followed you to the home of the hermit and hid along the path, planning to kill you when you returned

home. When several hours passed and you did not appear, I came out of my ambush to find you. I stumbled on your bodyguards, who recognized and wounded me. I escaped from them, but would have bled to death if you had not bandaged my wound. I wanted to kill you, but you saved my life. Now, if I live and if you wish, I will become your most faithful servant and order my family to do likewise. Forgive me.”

Quickly the king made peace with his enemy, forgiving him and promising to send his personal physician to stay with him until he gained his health.

Leaving the wounded man, the king left the hut and looked for the hermit. He found him kneeling in the garden they had dug the day before. “For the last time, my friend, I ask you to answer my questions.”

“But they have already been answered,” the hermit replied.

“I don’t understand,” the king responded.

“If you had not been moved with compassion for my weakness yesterday and stayed to dig, you would have returned home. The man would have attacked you. I was the most important person, and the most important task was to do good for me. Later, when the man appeared, it was the best time for you to take care of him, for if he had died you would never have made peace with him. Therefore, he was the most important man, and what you did for him was the most important task.

“Remember this, there is only one important time: Now. And the most important person is the person we see now. God gives us one opportunity at a time. The person I meet now and the task that lies immediately before me are always more important than anyone or anything in the future. The future may never happen. The present is a reality.”¹

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” May we live fully

each day; for each day is a gift from God and that's why we call it the present. Amen.

1 I am grateful to William R. White, who cites this version of the Tolstoy story in his: "Two Questions," *Stories for the Gathering: A Treasury for Christian Storytellers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), pp. 22-25.