

Slow Church

I Corinthians 13:1-13; John 15:1-11

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, (Aug. 14) 2011

(Upon My Twenty-Second Year Anniversary)

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This week I received an email from a good friend who is a highly respected pastor of a very good church which is about two to three times larger than us. He asked: “What do you do when ...?”

*Your deacon chair has basically quit doing anything because he’s in his second year of doing it, because no one else would accept the position of deacon chair after his first year, and he’s starting a new law practice and is overwhelmed.

*And your Youth Comm. Chair’s job has just put him on six days a week, twelve hours a day (yes, that’s 72 hours per week).

*And his co-chair has just taken a second job and is now too busy to come to any meetings (and they’re the only two who ever come to any meetings – because everyone else is too busy).

*And one deacon calls you this morning to resign because she’s overwhelmed and just can’t do it all.

*And a dad calls you this morning to complain about that same deacon because she’s not pulling her weight on the swim team parents’ group, of which she (the deacon) chairs, and in the conversation the dad tells you about his daughter breaking down and crying because she’s playing select soccer **and**

running on the track team, and she's worried about homework and never has time to just goof off.

*And you've got your first meetings coming up with youth and children and you're starting an adult Bible study for the new school year and you haven't had time to plan well and you're going to have to fly by the seat of your pants like you did last year but you can't quit only (and I mean only) because there is no one to take your place.

*And the nominating committee report is due Sunday, but they have vacancies because no one can teach several of the children and youth's classes – people are too busy to volunteer to teach, and you know that where you used to have six classes you now have only three because no one comes to Sunday School anymore because they're too busy.

“What do you do?” he asked.

I told him, “I don't know. I'm too busy to answer and I'll ask my congregation.”

Another clergy friend emailed me about some of the same problems. He said that very morning his wife was reading her Bible while she blow-dried her hair. He said that in normal circumstances he would suggest to a church member that they might get up fifteen minutes earlier to give God and the Bible undivided attention but that would mean his wife get up at 4:15 in the morning instead of her normal 4:30 and she won't get home from her job until after 6:30 pm.

These emails hit close to home for all of us. Our church might not be as overwhelmed with busy-ness but we're close. I've mentioned before that a few years ago I was at a meeting, sponsored by the Lilly Endowment of Religion, of

about 200 clergy and theologians from across the country and representing most all major Christian traditions, and we were asked what we considered the major obstacle to our people – you – of growing in Christ. And the clear answer by everyone present was the speed of contemporary life – we’re too busy to have time for Christ, for spiritual growth and formation, and for service. Our lives are lived with so much haste that we don’t have time for God, for each other, or for others.

And here’s the knottiest part of it: we can’t get out of it. We’re running as fast as we can and we can’t stop. Everything we’re doing is worthwhile one way or another or we find ourselves caught in our lifestyles and jobs that try to support our lifestyle. And in this economy, which many are calling hyper or turbo-capitalism, businesses, corporations, institutions, schools and universities are all trying to do the same with fewer people and less money. Everyone is working longer hours or working two jobs and running faster just to stay even. Getting ahead? What’s that? Our lives are like driving on the crowded interstate or the freeway – if we’re not driving 80 or more, we’re falling behind and in danger of being run over.

Speed keeps us from growing in our relationship with Christ, with each other, with others, and with God’s good creation. At the same time, speed shapes our lives so that it becomes a kind of habit. We don’t even recognize how it forms us and causes to see in particular ways. Everyone from philosophers to theologians to sociologists to psychologists and medical doctors are writing about the connections between speed and stress and violence.

We even want a god who hurries. Pay attention to our superheroes in movies and books and you get an idea of the kind of god we’d like to have.

In the 1979 *Superman: The Movie*, Superman uses his super-faster-than-a-speeding-bullet speed to prevent a series of catastrophes, only to find that in spite of all his successes, he failed to save Lois Lane's life. Rather than accept his limitations, in a burst of grief, Superman races as never before and manages to turn back time. He saves her and rescues himself from the horror of failing to be the hero. He hurries and therefore saves.

If we could only go faster, maybe we could get it all done. Maybe we could save ourselves or save our lifestyles or save something.

But the God we know in Jesus Christ is not in a hurry and if we're going to follow him, then we have to learn not to be in a hurry, as well.

The Creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 show God as not being in a hurry. God creates different parts of the world each day, each in its appropriate time, and then stops to admire each and call it good. God enjoys and savors creation and at the end, God rests on the Sabbath, God abides not because God is tired or stressed but because God enjoys creation. God takes delight in us.

On through the Genesis story, through humanity's fall and the spread of sin, God watches over generations of humanity before finally sending the flood. But after the flood, God promises to never again resorting to the efficient solution of wiping out sinful humanity. Instead, from then on in the Bible, the story is about building trust with one couple – Abraham and Sarah – and through them, with one people.

God commits to patient love. It's slow work. Biblical writers and theologians across the centuries compare God's covenant with the people of God to a stormy marriage. Part of the grace of the marriage covenant any of us make, is that it permits a couple to take their time growing in love. Bad times in a marriage

are not cause for panic and we learn that there is more to marriage than singular, romantic moments. Marriage is more reliable than the momentary good or bad. Faithful, abiding love is something we grow into over time – with our spouses and with God.

Jesus is the fullest and clearest exemplification of God's patient and abiding love. In the fullness of time – at the right time and not before – God sends his Son to be born as an infant, to grow and learn, serve and love and eventually suffer and die. After 30 years of growing and serving, it took only a moment to betray, only hours to crucify, and only an instant to pierce him. Yet even then, God was not in a hurry. Jesus lay in the tomb for Friday night, Saturday, Saturday night, until Sunday morning. He was resurrected after three days, and even then it was out of our sight, so that when the stone was rolled away and Jesus walked forth in new life, God was the only witness. God does not need the spotlight of a superhero and God takes time. Jesus is never in a hurry.

This is the God we worship and follow and learn to love and serve. And to love means to allow ourselves to be transformed by what one loves. We become like what we love. And if we abide in God and God's love then that's who we become. God lovingly enjoys and takes delight in us and in all of creation and if we take the time to abide in God, we do the same.

The great theologian St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "Where love is, there is the eye." What Aquinas was saying is that lovers see things in each other that others don't. People in love see and love deeply. If we're not in love, whether because we're in too much of a hurry or anxiety or boredom or impatience, we don't have the attentiveness and faithfulness to linger and remain and abide with others long

enough to be amazed by their particularity and enjoy their presence. Lovers relish and revel in the presence of each other.

People in love grow past the usual stereotypes and assumptions and see more deeply. The father says, “I don’t like that boy. He’s good for nothing.” The daughter says, “But you don’t know him like I do. He’s really caring and sensitive.” In her love, she sees past the assumptions.

That’s why many pastors like me are learning a lot from the Slow Food movement. Perhaps you’ll remember that the Slow Food movement started some years ago when American fast food restaurants were opened in Italy. Fast food is an industrial product that is built upon efficiency, profitably, and speed. Fast food is contrary to everything Italian food and meals are about, hence Carlo Petrini started the Slow Food movement to help recover the connections between quality of life and the time it takes to not only properly prepare food and to savor and enjoy it, but also the time it takes to properly care for the land and for the farm workers to be treated justly. Slow Food says to enjoy what God has given us, we must take time.

Episcopal minister Robert Farrar Capon is also a chef, who loves food and loves to cook. He has written a modern classic called *The Supper of the Lamb*, which is a theological reflection on preparing and enjoying a meal. At one point, reflecting on wine he says:

With wine at hand, the good man concerns himself, not with getting drunk, but with drinking in all the natural delectabilities of wine: taste, color, bouquet; it’s manifold graces; the way it compliments food and enhances conversation; and its sovereign power to turn evenings into occasions, to lift eating beyond nourishment to conviviality, and to bring the race, for a few hours at least, to that

happy state where men are wise and women beautiful, and even one's children begin to look promising (p. 91).

Like Slow Food, Slow Church is about taking time with God and each other and with creation. Like Father Capon learning to enjoy and celebrate good wine with a meal with friends, church is where we learn to abide and savor our devotion and love. It is a love that cannot be rushed. It is a love that gives us lover's eyes as we see more of whom God is and who we are. Like the Apostle Paul said, "Love is patient and kind." It is an abiding love.

This is **not** an excuse for laziness or passivity in the face of injustice. It is about the patient trust in God and God's Loving Way in Christ that will win out in the end.

St. Augustine said that creatures, like animals and plants and fish in the sea, do not and cannot audibly praise God. But simply by living out their lives in a way that shows God's plan and provision, they bear witness to the God who made them.

That's why the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins said, "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: ... Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is – Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places, Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his To the Father through the features in men's faces."

In my twenty-two years here with you, one of the deep and abiding joys is the discovery of who you are in Christ – how God brought you here and your wonderfully unique stories. Some of my colleagues say they get bored in a small church, which is something I can't understand. As your pastor, I learn and watch as each and every one of you abides and grows uniquely into who God has created you to be. In our case, Christ might not play in ten thousand places; perhaps it is in

80 places. But Christ is playing and working in and through each of you. As I know you and see you with an abiding love, I am learning to see how you bear witness to the joy and delight of God. And I give thanks to God.

Joan Watson had a remarkable experience with so many of you yesterday when you stopped by her hospital room and told her your stories of cancer survival. She had no idea so many of you were cancer survivors. It was a great encouragement to her. But this is what happens when we take the time to abide with one another. We learn each other's stories and we're amazed and moved and encouraged. This is what church is to be about.

When I was a new and young pastor, Browning Ware, who was the wise pastor of FBC Austin for many years, told me that you can tell a lot about a church by how much people linger with each other after worship. If church members hang around and talk until you have to turn out the lights and push them out the door, and then they talk more out in the parking lot, it's a sign of a good church. But if church is rushed, and as soon as the Amen is sounded they head out the door to their cars, with everyone going their separate ways, that's not a good sign.

By those standards, you are a good church – a slow church.

That's why I want to get one of those yellow highway signs that says, "Slow Church." We can put it up on the driveway just as you pull off Appleby Sand Road into the church property. The Slow Church sign would remind us to slow down and watch for running children and people coming out of the building. But it would also say that you are now entering a place where God does not hurry and as we walk with God, neither do we. Here we move with the speed of love.

Now I know, for most of us who are running as fast as we can to keep from being left behind or run over, need encouragement. To walk with God and each

other is not easy. Hard choices about how we spend our time will have to be made. But we don't have to rush. God is patiently waiting for us.

There is one place in the Bible where God hurries. Jesus tells the story of the young son who ran off in righteous living. But the father in the story waits. The son blows everything and ends up working in the pig pens. And finally, the son "comes to himself;" wakes up and heads home. The father who has been patiently waiting and watching; everyday standing on the porch looking for the son, sees the son approaching and Jesus says, that he ran and put his arms around him and welcomed him home.

You are invited to come home. God waits for you.

Amen and amen.

*Thanks to Norman Wirzba's *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* and to Kelly Johnson's "God Does Not Hurry" in *God Does Not ...*, edit. By Brent Laytham, for their help in this sermon.