

"In-Between Times"

I Corinthians 15:1-11; Matthew 6:24-34

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

September 16, 2018 – 17th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

In her novel, *The Ice Chorus*, Sarah Stonich writes about a woman caught in the middle of time. Lise's loveless marriage has broken up and it is time to move on with her life. To where, and for what, she doesn't know. What **is** clear is that the past is over, for both its good and its bad.

Lise (the main character) has rented a cottage on the Western Coast of Ireland, and there she intends to settle, at least until the next stage of her life begins to unfold. She cleans and paints the small house where many families have lived over the generations. She unpacks the crates that contain her past life in Toronto and puts the items away, not sure if she will stay for a season or a lifetime. Everything depends on an unpredictable future, which seems as murky the morning fog that hovers outside her windows.

Lise has much to do as she settles in to the life of the village, but it's a busyness of the moment. The more important movement of her life is on hold and waiting, and that could turn any number of ways. She just doesn't know, yet. As readers we're pulled into the story because of the uncertainty of what will come next. Lise's future hangs mostly on things quite out of her own control and we wonder along with her how it will all unfold. The book is *The Ice Chorus* and I'd recommend it.

Those "in-between" times. The periods in life where we're left with a past that is over but a future which has yet to come. We know where we've been, but we've yet to arrive where we're going. It's an uncomfortable time; a time without resolution. I think we all spend some significant portions of our life in this way.

It's time when one job is over, but the next hasn't come. When a medical procedure is undertaken, but healing has not yet occurred. When an argument has interrupted a relationship, but there has been no reconciliation. When we've made a bid on a house, but the property is pending and waiting on some else's decision. When we're worried about a son or daughter, but can do only so much about the problem. In-between times.

From little issues to critical ones, we are often left in the difficulty of the middle. We don't like this position, but feel powerless to change the facts. So we worry and stew and fret, and keep wondering what will come next. Have you ever been there? I have.

Mid-career I was working as director of a health organization. It wasn't a bad place to be and we did important work, but I had a restlessness that increased with time.

Fundraising kept taking more and more of my day and I found myself being pressed to compromise on things I felt strongly about, like not setting community events on Sunday mornings. So when my board decided that our annual "person of the year" awardee should be selected less on merit, and more for what his or her business contacts might donate, I knew it was time to go—job or no job.

I guess I thought the next leg of my journey would take me rather quickly to a new place, but that didn't happen immediately. Since graduating from college there had never been a gap in my career or income. The longer that time went on, the more those old adversaries, Anxiety and Worry, seem to hang around my back door. Some days they knocked stridently and pushed to come in and fill my head and soul with depressing thoughts. While I may not have given in, I admit that I often heard their words loud and clear.

One Sunday I was asked to fill the pulpit in a downtown church. I looked at the lectionary text I would need to work with for that day and found it contained these familiar words from Jesus:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Don't worry? I really didn't want to preach from these words. I knew I wasn't ready to preach from this text. Still, I knew I had to preach from them and to try to make some sense for others of what they presented. I wondered was it just bad luck or some kind of heavenly joke that I had to deal with this particular passage?

So I struggled with this text. What have carefree flowers and birds to do with me? Pardon me, Jesus, but isn't the analogy poorly chosen? What could their situation possibly have to do with mine? Do they have to spend \$30 a tank for gas to fill their cars? Do they have caregiving responsibilities for an elderly mother? Do they have unexplained aches and pains? Do they need a new furnace? Hey, and how about a job and income?

At some point that week, however, I began to realize the full depth of these words of Jesus. Maybe this selection was **not** by chance after all. Maybe it was the right text for me to read and contemplate and pray over and struggle to make sense of. Somewhere along the way that week I realized that there is something that Christ was trying to tell me, to tell all of us, that there is a message that he wants us to hear and take to heart.

So I sweated over that passage then, and even again in preparing this sermon today... and I think this is what Jesus is saying to us:

He first directs us to the birds of the air and the flowers growing upon the earth, but he is not just trying to get our minds off our worries; instead, he's prompting us to discover the larger purposes of God by first looking at the world right around us. The birds and flowers simply live the life that God gives them without obstruction, without worry, without objection. They make the most of the sun and the rain and all the other elements that are provided, and fulfill their time accordingly.

We, on the other hand, take what God gives us and often complain and argue and bargain and end up by declaring that the gift isn't good enough, that we deserve more. After all, aren't we worth more than birds or flowers? And that is exactly the point that Jesus wants to make. We **are** worth more than plants and the other animals in God's eyes.

Hear again what he says, “Therefore don’t worry, saying, ‘What are we going to eat?’ or ‘What are we going to drink?’ or ‘What are we going to wear?’ For it is those without faith who strive for such things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.”

Yes, material needs are real. Jesus would never deny that. The intention of this teaching, however, is not about how to get through the temporal needs of the day; rather, it’s about the cost associated with worry. That’s the high price we pay when we don’t have a true base to life worthy of our trust or when that base is in ourselves. He says, “You can’t serve two masters....” If you believe in God then you have to trust in God and let God do for you what you can’t do for yourself.

I think Jesus tells us that troubles come when we look only to ourselves—**our** power, **our** ingenuity, **our** abilities—as the bottom line to our living. Jesus is saying to us, “Do what you can for yourself, make the necessary efforts, but trust enough to let God do the rest.” So—as the old story goes—if you’re out in the middle of a lake and a terrific storm come up, pray but row like hell at the same time.

If trust in God is central to our faith, what then does Jesus tell us to do with that trust? He says, “Strive above everything else for God’s vision of the world, and what you need to be about, and all these things will be given to you as well.” In other words take up the values, the priorities, the practices which God deems important, and live accordingly. If you begin each day in active relationship with God you’ll discover how much better you’ll deal with whatever problems come your way.

Jesus tells us to start with God at the core of our lives, then realize how this changes the way we cope with adversity. Take yourself out of the center and you can learn to accept even the things you cannot change. Adjust the point of your focus and you will see that you are really held in the palm of God’s hand—loved and valued simply for who you are. Then love others in the same way.

The lesson today tells us to trust in God and put our natural fears and worries into a much bigger picture. It may not necessarily change everything in life right now, but it does give us the assurance that we can meet our challenges head on. For it isn’t just ourselves that we’re left to rely on in trying times, but God at work directly and through others. That’s our real strength and it will not let us down in those many trying periods of life.

In-between times are hard for everyone, but they also cause us to sort out the really important things from all the lesser ones. In-between times push us to discover, or discover again, where our ultimate trust belongs.

Just as that holds true for individuals, so it holds true for churches like ours in a time of transition. We have to ground ourselves where our faith begins. Yes, our congregation may hopefully move into a better tomorrow, but it’s not going to happen because we’re so smart or clever. Rather, because we learn to put our trust in God and then work to follow where the Lord leads us.

In-between times allow all of us to better understand we have to move ahead but to realize that we need a trustworthy guide for the way. Christ is that leader for us, and he will be our

companion as well. He will never leave our side no matter how difficult the way may become. And that holds true for individuals and churches alike.