

If Not Now, When?

Sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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There are thousands of ways to put off writing a sermon, many more ways I'm convinced than were available to the student in our reading this morning. After all, ministry affords so many interesting distractions – looking up recipes in a case a last minute potluck gets scheduled, listing out all the hymns we've sung in the last 5 years so we don't repeat any too frequently, reading up on trout fishing in case I ever decide to preach on that. But perhaps the most interesting is trolling internet blogs for stories on procrastination.

The stories other people relate about the lengths to which we humans go to avoid what we don't want to do are both entertaining and amazing. There was the teacher who took so long to grade papers that she finally just told her students the papers were stolen. Or the husband who located the whiteboard his wife had purchased to keep track of the household to do list. Fifty years later he found the board with the original 20 items—all undone and most still needed. Here are some of my favorite stories of our greatest (or worst) moments of procrastination posted on various blogs.

This one comes from Sarah Clark in Northumberland, England:

In October 1987 a husband assures his pregnant wife that he will put shelves in a tall kitchen cabinet in order to make into a storage cupboard. The shelves are finally put in by our son (the "bump") when he is 16 years old. Over the 16-year period I heard an endless line of excuses.

Ian Whitten of Kent writes this:

A friend of mine, who I'll call "Dave" (because that was his name) said he would do anything to avoid [studying]. At one point he infamously found himself weighing the cat, convinced that he would only be able to settle down to work if he had that data to hand. As a result, some 25 years later, the act of procrastination is referred to by my family as "weighing the cat."

audiosnag writes:

Not doing my taxes for two years. Apparently Canada Revenue doesn't like that. Who knew??

The mangalist writes:

Unless someone misses their uncle's funeral due to procrastination, I hereby officially declare writing papers at 2 a.m. NOT procrastinating.

We all have stories mostly humorous, some not so amusing, of the ways we put off until tomorrow what we could have done today. Most are fairly benign in their consequences. Getting the Christmas cards out on time, taking down the decorations in a seasonally appropriate manner, having to stay up all night to get that presentation finished: these things do not carry heavy penalties. But, too, we are much quicker to share those sorts of stories than the ones that carry substantial consequences. Missing your uncle's funeral, or all the other ways we can find to let down our families, can leave scars that last decades or even generations. We may quip "Who

knew?” about paying our taxes but the financial consequences of garnished wages can have real impacts on lives beyond our own.

Here, I want to consider those actions that reach beyond a missed term paper and far beyond ourselves. Today we are talking about issues of justice, about the *urgency* to create a just, peaceful and sustainable society. As in the past 2 weeks, we take as our guide the three questions offered by the Jewish sage Hillel the Elder for knowing and doing the right thing.

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
 If I am only for myself, what am I?
 And if not now, when?

In this third sermon of the series, we take up the final question “If not now, when?” With this question, Hillel urges us to consider that delaying action might be to deny justice. It’s a sentiment that has been offered throughout the ages in many different formulations. Here, on the day before we celebrate the life and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it is hard not to hear the words of his famous letter from Birmingham City Jail where he declared that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” This was a reference back to the legal maxim that “justice delayed is justice denied.”

As a legal concept, these words are generally attributed to the British Prime Minister, William Gladstone, but they are found in similar forms throughout history. Indeed, Gladstone’s sentiment was well grounded in English legal tradition. The Magna Carta, that 13th century English charter of rights, declared that “to no one will we refuse or delay, right or justice.” Some 1200 years earlier, the rabbis of the Mishnaic period declared that “the sword comes into the world because of justice delayed and justice denied.” These words are from the Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, that part of the Jewish holy literature that contains the ethical teachings of the early rabbis, the same place where we find Hillel’s three questions including “If not now, when?”

Throughout history, wise women and wise men have counseled us not to put off until tomorrow that which we can do today, because to do so is to deny the cause of justice. But as we all know you do not have to tell a child to stop punching her brother unless she in fact has a tendency to punch her brother. And so sages throughout history and in diverse cultures repeatedly urge us to see delaying justice as equivalent to denying justice. They probably wouldn’t have to be so insistent about it if we didn’t have such a tendency to drag our feet on these things. What is it that causes that?

Well, change is hard. Any type of change is hard, but in creating justice the changes are most unwelcome by the very people that need to make them. We are in some way invested in the status quo whether because it actively works to our advantage or, as Martin Luther King said, because the human spirit does not “move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one’s own bosom and in the surrounding world.” He further acknowledges that it is not always clear exactly what the right thing to do is, in which direction justice lies, and so we may become “mesmerized by uncertainty.” I would say that all the many reasons we can think of, all the excuses and creative energy of denial, reduce to one thing fear—fear of loss, fear of looking at ugly truths we do not want to see, fear of trying and being found

wanting, fear of trying and succeeding. At some point, we must set aside even fear and move on. We must speak. We must see the fierce urgency in this moment, and act.

And so we come together that we may offer a hand, encouragement, a gentle nudge or a reassuring smile. We light our chalice each week as a reminder that we can, together, dispel the darkness and gather courage to face our fears. We light the flame of knowledge (and even sometimes doubt) within each other that we might break the spell of mesmerizing uncertainty. In the light of community we call ourselves to the fierce urgency of this moment, the urgency that will brook no apathy or conformity to injustice.

If not now, when? If not us, who?

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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