

O Christ, Surround Me: Noticing God's Presence in the Seasons of Life

Lenten Small Group Study Guide
Emmanuel Presbyterian Church
Lent 2019



"Ecclesiastes" by John August Swanson

What is Lent?

Lent is the 40-day period in the Church Year that commemorates that period in Jesus' life when, immediately following his baptism, he went into the wilderness and was tempted by the devil. In this wilderness he decides to be faithful to his Father, and this decision sets the stage for the rest of the Gospel story to unfold. Thus Matthew, Mark and Luke all begin the story of Jesus public ministry with the telling of his baptism and this wilderness temptation experience.

Lent is a season when we consider not just the journey of Jesus but also what it means for us to follow him on that journey. It is a season that begins with the admission that we will die and ends with a celebration of resurrection. We begin the season on Ash Wednesday with the admission: "We are dust and to dust we will return," and we end the season on Easter with the proclamation "Christ is risen, he is risen indeed." Lent gives us the opportunity to both acknowledge our limits as created beings and live in the confidence of that the love and grace of our God is without limits.

The theme, content and format for our 2019 Lenten study

A big part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus is to heed his call to "stay awake." The spiritual life is primarily about learning to be attentive and responsive to the presence of God. It is to live expecting that every moment is an opportunity to notice and participate in the work of God. In the prayer "O Christ, surround me," we pray for this attentiveness and ask for the ability to see God at work in the everyday moments of our lives. When we pray this prayer we are not so much asking God to show up, as we are asking God to help us to wake up to his presence.

This Lenten study is written with a view to helping us to practice spiritual attentiveness. Each week our discussions will be informed by four sources:

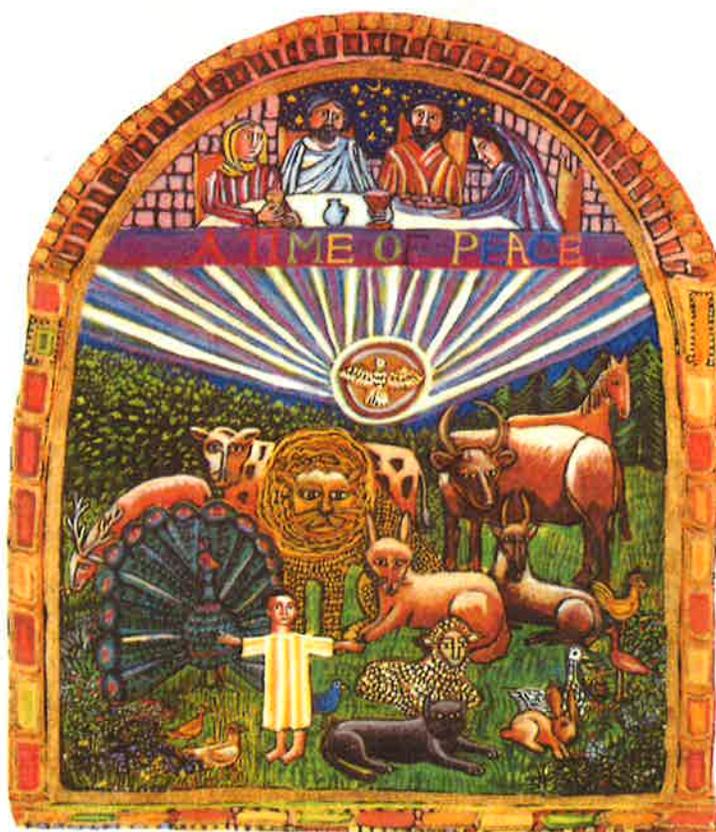
- the observations about the ebb and flow of the various seasons of life made by the preacher in Ecclesiastes 3,
- the Scripture text and sermon from the previous Sunday,
- an essay by Joan Chittister taken from her book [There is a Season](#),
- and a detail from artist John August Swanson's work "Ecclesiastes."

The conversation between these four sources and our dialogue with one another as we are both challenged and encouraged by what these witnesses have to say, is designed not to help us accumulate more theological information, but to train us to be good observers who are above all else trying to listen for what the Spirit has to say to the Church. Each session is an opportunity to work with the question of what it looks like to faithfully follow Jesus as we face into the circumstances of living through the various seasons of life.

As you engage the four sources of this study you may at times find yourself shouting "Amen" in elated affirmation or feeling like throwing this booklet across the room in angry disagreement. While it isn't wrong to agree or disagree, it is wrong to allow your conclusion to end the conversation. If we stop looking for the ways in which the "One who holds all things together" is holding us together in our disagreement, we forego the opportunity to grow because we effectively stop looking for Christ in our midst. So if at the end of your

meeting together you find yourselves in the midst of a seemingly unresolvable disagreement, pause to remember that Jesus will continue to be Lord of all even when we find it hard to agree.

The life of discipleship is not primarily about figuring out and following a particular set of rules. It is primarily about remaining in a faithful relationship with the One who is out in front of us and inviting us to follow. In spite of life's liabilities and assets, the ups and downs, the ebb and flow of the seasons of life, one thing remains constant: Jesus keeps his promise to be with us always. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. This is the truth that fuels our journey of faith. It gives us the hope and confidence we need to persevere through all of life's seasons.



Lenten Small Group Studies

Week 1



A Time to Tear and a Time to Sew
(Mark 2:13-22, "A Time to Lose" in There is a Season)

Preparing for your time together:

- Attend worship on Sunday March 10th or listen to the sermon from that day on line prior to your meeting.
- Read and reflect on Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
- Read Mark 2:13-22 at least once a day for each of the seven days prior to your meeting together.
- Read Joan Chittister's essay "A Time to Lose"
- Identify and reflect on the way in which a growing experience in your life was both a loss and a gain. How did it tear or destroy something and what was created to mend or replace the thing that was lost?

Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. Share about a time in your life when a loss made room for a gain. How did it tear or destroy something and what was created to mend or replace the thing that was lost?
2. What is the context of Jesus' words about the new wine skins and the new patch on an old cloak? To whom is he speaking and what is the point he is trying to make? How do these metaphors explain his choice to engage in a ministry of openness and acceptance? Why do you think this kind of ministry is perceived to be a threat?
3. Joan Chittister ends her essay "A time to lose" with the observation: "Loss is simply another entrance into life." In what ways are you currently questioning this assertion? As you look at our world right now, what are the potential losses that you fear? What are the losses that seem to be invitations to despair rather than gateways to hope?
4. Read John 16:32-33. In what ways does this assurance help you to face into and deal with your fear?
5. Close your time with prayer for one another.

A TIME TO LOSE

The implications of the small panel struck me with unusual force. It was Adam and Eve being banished, maybe even running away, from the Garden of Paradise at the end of an angel's sword. So far, so good. The scene was relatively standard. The problem was that the inscription under Swanson's painting read, "A Time to Lose." Lose? Well, that was not the way my second-grade teacher saw it at all. When Adam and Eve were turned out of Eden it was not, as far as she was concerned, a situation to be defined at the level of a "loss." It was in the style of disgrace and shame and total human degradation. Thanks to them, thanks to their mindless and miserable failure, she taught, nothing had ever been right since. For any of us. In one fell swoop, she insisted, we had squandered it all. No, Sister Laura would not have called the painting, "A Time to Lose," as if this were just another one of life's little processes. She would surely have called it, "A Time to Be Punished" or a "A Time to Repent" or something, at least, that brooked no doubt about the fact that this was a mess and who was at fault for it and what ought to be done about it. Sister Laura was a purist.

I stared at the picture, however, and began to think Sister Laura may have missed something and in missing it blinded me for years as well. Thanks to that kind of theology, I had grown up under the impulse of another set of meanings and another set of labels. As a result of

that kind of thinking, I saw all failure as bad. Like a child who stumbles into the family heirloom and breaks it, I felt full of sin instead of full of promise. I had as a result been able to miss completely the church's more certain concept, sung in the ecstatic *Exultet* of Easter night, when finally Adam and Eve get their share of praise. "Oh, happy fault" the church, full-throated, sings. "Oh, happy fault," that brought us the need for such a savior. "Oh, happy fault" that brought us to this point.

"No evil is without its compensation," the Roman rhetorician Seneca wrote. "The less money, the less trouble; the less favor, the less envy." Nothing, in other words, is all bad.

The Chinese tell a charming story about a farmer who had only one plow horse to get him through planting time. One day the horse broke away from his stake and ran off into the hills. Neighbors poured in to commiserate with the man's bad luck. "Well, good event, bad event," the farmer responded. "Who knows?"

And sure enough a few weeks later, the horse came galloping down the mountain leading an entire pack of wild horses straight into the open corral. The neighbors went wild with glee. "Well," the old man said in quiet answer to their excited congratulations, "good event, bad event. Who knows?"

And sure enough at harvest time, the farmer's only son and heir fell under the bucking horse he was training and suffered a totally mangled leg. The neighbors were beside themselves with distress for the aging man, whose harvest was now in danger. "Well, good event, bad event. Who knows?" The old man shrugged as he saw most of his harvest lost in the field.

Then about six weeks later, the warlord came through the valley, conscripting every young man in the village for the latest feudal war. With one exception. The warlord would not have

the crippled son of the aging farmer as part of the king's noble army. And when his neighbors, grieving for the loss of their own sons, envied the old farmer for the presence of his, he simply folded his hands and said, "Well, good event, bad event. Who knows?"

That fact is that loss is not only, not always, bad, but also is sometimes great good in disguise. The United States never lost a war, for instance, until it crumbled in front of a Vietnamese guerrilla army, and then, for the first time, war became a less certain foreign policy than ever before in the history of the country. If the young Indian lawyer Mohandas Gandhi had not been thrown off a train in South Africa because he was colored, it is probable that the movement that became known as non-violent resistance would never have developed. Yet without it, India itself may not have won its independence from England for years nor may the United States have ever known its own non-violent Civil Rights movement that developed under that same impetus here as well. If Helen Keller had not been deaf, the whole deaf world might still be tortured by silence.

And in our own simple lives so many losses weave the skein of reality. The death of the father becomes the beginning of a whole new life for everyone in the family. The loss of the job becomes the beginning of the new and better career. The end of the money means the opportunity to extricate ourselves from the counterfeit lifestyle that had sedated our minds and plastitized our souls. Loss is surely meant to be an invitation to options.

For those who know loss, life cries out for fulfillment, and possibility is forever new.

Learning the value of loss is, however, a trip to a foreign land. Loss galls the spirit of this culture to the bone. We do not teach our children to lose. We teach them *how* to lose. We teach

them the rituals of losing, that is, but we do not teach them the role of losing in life.

In this world, we learn quickly that losing is failure rather than simply another way to a different goal. Everything we learn from infancy on is intended to be tested to determine our capacity for success and our ability to compete. None of it has much to do at all with our talent for life itself.

We do not teach the children of this culture that games are games, for instance. We teach our children that games are life. We say that games shape character and build confidence, and then if they are students we bribe them to play for us and pad their grades. If they are professionals, we pay them obscene amounts of money to win for us and then fine them for using the drugs or instigating the brawls that our need to win demands of them. And all the while we line up our young for handshakes and snacks after the game, we whisper in their ears that “no one remembers who came in second” and that “winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.”

Then we wonder why suicide and divorce and wife-beating statistics are so high after economic downswings. We lament the fact that welfare families stop trying to get ahead. We can’t imagine the degree of white-collar crime that has emerged to cover up financial mistakes and business errors and social embarrassments. We rue widowhood and corporate changes and broken plans like the plague. The game is to win — and everything is the game.

We have forgotten the virtue of losing. We have destroyed the creativity of loss. We have turned the natural cycle of learning by failing into shame and guilt and anger.

But that is not what the Garden of Eden was all about. “What God gave Adam,” Elie Wiesel wrote, “was not forgiveness from sin. What God

gave Adam was the right to begin again.” If we want to be mentally healthy, if we want to live full and vibrant lives, we need to remember the lesson of the Garden of Eden. It is the fine art of learning to be wrong.

Loss can be a lovely and freeing thing. It gives to a few what is too often missing to the many. It provides a chance for a person to start over in life, to scrape away the barnacles of time and empty out the accretions of the years. It says there is in us whatever it takes to learn from the past and adapt to the future. It says that resilience is a grace for the asking.

There are two hurdles to be overcome in us if loss is ever to be the elixir of life that it was meant to be. The first barrier to the liberating experience of loss is the need to succeed. The second barrier is the corruption that comes with the need to control.

The question, of course, is a basic one: Did Adam and Eve, our archetypes of the human race, succeed or fail? The answer, I think, depends on whether we think of them as human or divine. If we see them as quasi-divine, then they were, indeed, failures of the most monstrous kind, aware of truth and disregarding of it, in touch with the heights and uncaring of them. Impetuous imposters both, they were beneath the gods and an embarrassment to the human race as well. The fact is, however, that Eve and Adam were human, not angelic, and the eating of the apple was the most humanizing thing they did. What if the real message in the Garden story is that it is of the essence of humanity to stumble from apple tree to apple tree, trying to get it right, searching for “the difference between good and evil” but able to learn it only the hard way? Then the lesson for the human race to learn from the Garden was not that God was angry that Adam and Eve were not gods, but that God knew it was necessary for them to learn that they were human, that life would not be easy, that there would

be pitfalls aplenty, and, most of all, that they could survive them one after the other after the other.

Success, Ecclesiastes implies, is not the ability to maintain good fortune; it is the ability to survive loss. It is, in fact, the redefinition of success that loss brings to life on gilded wings.

The second barrier to understanding the value of loss may be the hardest one of all to negotiate. The loss of the sense of self that defeat brings in its wake is the struggle we cannot name and the devil we cannot rout. If I do not get the trophy, am I a real athlete at all? If I lose the promotion, is there anything left of me to present to the public? If I have no achievements, no hoard of treasures, no list of titles, no host to which to append myself, am I really anything at all? How does a divorcée face the city? How does the widow begin to go out alone? How does the past president face the world? How does the college dropout face the neighborhood? How does the defeated quarterback face the family that schooled him to win? How do people redefine themselves after loss? The answer, of course, is in Ecclesiastes. We must redefine ourselves just as Adam and Eve did — as Adam and Eve, the same people, but wiser now and open to the promise of new life.

The spiritual effects of loss are profound. We come to know ourselves in the contests we could not win and the summits we could not scale and the goals we could not reach and in the loss of loves we could not live without. Then, like Adam and Eve, driven from the Edens of our life by the inadequacies of our soul, we come to see who we really are and what we're really made of. And we're amazed. We find that we have the ability to suffer as well as the ability to win, and we realize, then, that we can never really lose again. We can be made to do with less than once we had or dreamed about or wanted, perhaps, but we can never be made to

believe that life dies when things die or people go or images fade or the world turns one more uncontrollable time.

Self-knowledge is what happens when we find out that what we cannot do is not the only thing we can do. We cannot be an actor, perhaps, and so we fail to get the part, but we can paint scenery and so we become a designer. We cannot be the executive of the organization and are not given the position we wanted, but we can be its mainstay. We cannot be a great artist and no one buys our paintings, but we can put beauty in every poor and squalid room we enter.

And so we grow to full stature, not by always winning but by often losing. The Confucian scholar Ouyang De taught, "The water at the source and the water downstream are not two different natures. . . . All that we see and hear and think and do is due to heaven. All we have to do is to recognize what is true and what is false."

What is true is that we ourselves are more than however much we strive to achieve. What is false is that losing anything will be the end of us. What is true is that losing something can, in fact, be the beginning of an exciting new world, a totally new life, a completely different and even more satisfying way of being. What is real is that the water at the source and the water downstream are not two different natures. Whatever we are when our great life changes come is what we shall take into the next phase of life.

Things and positions and titles do not make us; we make them. No person in a position is one bit more than they ever were out of it, and being out of a position does not diminish us at all. What we did not have before we discovered the diamonds we will not be when we find them. A fool with a diamond is nothing but a fool with a diamond.

“The art of losing isn’t hard to master,” Elizabeth Bishop wrote. “So many things seem filled with the intent to be lost that their loss is no disaster.” Loss is simply another entrance into life. Whatever we are not prepared to lose we are enslaved to maintain — at any cost. Whatever we are not prepared to lose diminishes our sense of soul and depth of spirit. This definition of life is too narrow to nurture, too dangerous to maintain. It is time to lose it.



Week Two



**A Time to Love and a Time to Hate
(Colossians 3:1-17, "A Time to Love" in There is a Season)**

Preparing for your time together:

- Attend worship on Sunday March 17th or listen to the sermon from that day on line prior to your meeting.
- Read and reflect on Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
- Read Colossians 3:1-17 at least once a day for each of the seven days prior to your meeting together.
- Read Joan Chittister's essay "A Time to Love"
- Not all hate is bad. While there is a kind of hate that tears down and diminishes there is also a kind of hate that makes room for love. There are some things that ought to be repulsive to us, things that we need to "put off" if we ever hope to "put on" love. Make a list of good and bad kinds of hate. What kinds of hate destroy and what kinds of hate make room for love?

Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. Open your session together by having someone in the group read aloud Colossians 3:1-17. After reading the text, discuss it in terms of the lists you each made of good and bad kinds of hate. Is there such a thing as hating hate? What does hating or putting-off hate look like?
2. St. Paul loves lists. Here is Colossians 3 he has at least two lists: a list of what to put off/put to death (vs 5-9) and a list of what to put on (vs 12-14). How would you summarize those two lists? What do things in the first list prevent and what do the things in the second list promote?
3. In her essay "A Time to Love," Joan Chittister states: "Two things eat away at the human heart and block the development of love in us. One is narcissism and the other is a lack of self-esteem." Discuss this statement among yourselves. What is the difference between narcissism and self-esteem? How does Chittister describe the difference? What is the source of healthy self-esteem and why is it something that enables us to love?
4. At the end of his great treatise on love in 1 Corinthians 13, St. Paul equates love with maturity (read: 1 Cor. 13:8-13). Does love get easier as we get older and wiser? What is it about life experience and maturity that fosters an ability to love one another?
5. Whose love for you has taught you how to love? Close in prayer especially giving thanks for the love we have received that has equipped us to love others.

A TIME TO LOVE

A Thornton Wilder may have already said much of all there is to say on the subject. He wrote, "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning." What Wilder did not say is that it is so easy to rhapsodize about love, and many people do. It is so easy to fantasize about love, and whole industries are built on it. It is so easy to distort love and call it marriage.

More things pass for love than could substitute for the real item in almost any other category on earth. Sex and marriage and cohabitation all form the charade that has been bought and sold to look like varying degrees of commitment and eternal happiness.

But the Swanson painting, I realized, tells a different, better story. The painting, *Ecclesiastes*, says quite clearly that there is nothing that is love that does not make royalty of us all. Or put it this way: anything that degrades or demeans or destroys a person in any way is not love, no matter how loudly proclaimed.

Foreign as the concept of love as an exalting experience may be in a world given to premeditated and pernicious violence, it is home to the heart. It is at the same time alien to the point of the exotic now. We live in a culture that abuses its children and calls it love, but such abuse has never developed healthy adults. We live in a society that looks benignly on spousal rape and

calls it love, but such heartlessness has never produced a hallowed home. We spawn a public who humiliate one another in the name of "truth" until people shrivel in embarrassment, and we call it tough love, but degradation has never ended in holy friendship. We need to look at love again.

Sex drives this culture, not love. Because we cannot deny the feminist truth that women at large are treated like objects for male satisfaction and male service, we now deride feminism itself as brazen and crazy and unnatural and loud, a delusional relative shouting "Fire!" in the shower. But the statistics are all there shouting "Lie!" for those who are willing to see. We pay women less than we pay men in every single category in which they are employed, except prostitution and modeling, and say we respect them. We give them fancy titles now — Associate Director to the President, perhaps — but go on using them like clerks and say we revere them. We take their ideas but pass them over for promotions and say we value them. We trivialize their health problems but charge them more for health insurance and say we care for them. We say God made them equal to men but doesn't want them around churches and we say we look to them for moral leadership but don't give them any. We confuse biology and gender roles, using one to define the other, and say we see them as whole persons. We interpret mothering as eternally determinative but define

fathering as a fleeting event and say there is no difference between our expectations of fatherhood and our demands on motherhood. We put a token woman on every committee in order to keep the rest of the women off of it and say we believe in equality. We tut-tut women and patronize women and put women down and call it "God's will for them." And then we say how much we love them.

But that is not love. That is sexism. That does not make royalty of any of us. No real marriage can possibly be built on that kind of human misuse. No sanctifying friendship between the sexes can possibly rest on that foundation. That is diminishment of half the human race, and it is acid on the soul of men as well.

Sexism has stunted the development of men as surely as it has blocked the development of women. Men are victimized to the point of the absurd by it. If they do not want to brutalize other human beings for sport or social policy, they are ostracized for being weak. If money is not their only goal in life, they are labeled unsuccessful. If as children they begin to show emotion, they are told to "act like little men" and then find that they have no life-saving emotions left to retrieve when they grow up. They are told to be responsible for people who, in many instances, are smarter than they are. So, because they cannot do it and dare not say they cannot do it, they find themselves nagged and ridiculed all their inadequate lives. Then in their frustration they become bullies and batterers to prove their manliness. And, finally, they die young from overwork and overworry and overreaching.

We put women on pedestals and men in positions, but plastic pedestals and profiteering positions are no substitute for personhood. Being allowed to be half a person is no reward. Being seduced into the limitations of sexism is advantageous to some of us but diminishing of all of us. Marriage and machoism, pornography

and passion, domination and partnership are not synonyms. But we go on selling sex and sexism and all in the name of love.

Love, the panel demonstrates quite clearly, makes the every moment noble and us regal in the process. Love that is more real than self-satisfying exalts a person not to the heights of the unattainably romanticized, but to the level of the beautiful and the real. Love that does not free each of us to become our best and fullest selves befriends neither person and defrauds both. It is dishonesty so basic that no amount of marriage counseling, no patina of personal propriety, can ever cure its corrosion. The man who gets married to have someone take care of him, who wants "an old-fashioned wife" whose role in life is to live for him alone, does not really love anyone but himself. The best of them buy it with candy and flowers, but they are buying, nevertheless. The woman who wants to "marry a doctor" so that she can have a nice home and plenty of money reduces a man to the level of domestic help and marriage to a business agreement, no matter how well she plays its social game.

Love is about regal respect, royal reverence, and total support. It needs to be taught rather than made the victim of a kind of hormonal roulette. Chemistry quickens love, but it does not prove it and it will not sustain it.

Love, unfortunately for those who simplify it to their peril, is a paradox. It requires total commitment to the well-being of the other, and it demands total commitment to the well-being of the self as well. We teach devotion to the other but we do not understand that development of the self is equally important if there is to be any real relationship at all. We applaud one and are embarrassed by the other. Consequently, we teach little about love that is valid at all.

Love resides in the sanctification of friendship. Sad news, indeed, for those who have been

sacrificed to the smoke screen of physical attraction or social status where heart and single-mindedness should have been. Friendship, a subject of great philosophical inquiry to the ancients, lies chloroformed in the Western soul under the pose of companionship, teamwork, and social nicety. We have garbled the word to the point that it says almost nothing at all. No survival, no meaning, no royal commitment here. Friendship is sterner stuff than that.

Friendship requires the meeting of equals. "Friendship is one mind in two bodies," the poet Mencius wrote. Friendship bursts with the electric excitement that comes when we recognize a mind that is the mirror of our own, not its echo, not its opposite but not its muffler either. Equality and synergy become the touchstones of friendship, the measure of its meaning, the silken thread of survival that is its warp and woof.

I look to a friend for tender support and tough truth. I give a friend my attention and my interest, my genuine care, my deepest concern. I find in a friend's look that I am attractive and in a friend's laughter that I am engaging and in a friend's responses that I have something of value to say. I see in a friend someone I respect for qualities I admire and someone who, however surprising I find it, respects me for gifts I have trouble seeing in myself. I feel my own quality in the presence of a sterling friend.

A friend is not an interruption in life. A friend is the glue of my life, the centerpoint that holds all the rest of it together and assesses it for substance. Friendship is a game of high standards and wild excess where everything is possible but only the best in both of us meets the test of the acceptable. Friends do not frown; they question. Friends do not block; they enable. Friends do not control; they stand by. Friends do not dominate; they foster the best in me until no dross remains. Friends do not smother me; they free me. Friends do not love me for their sake;

they love me for my sake. They love me the way I want to be loved, not the way they want to love me. A friend is the other side of my soul.

Where there is no friend, there is no real conversation, there is only talk. Where there is no friend, there is no trusted counselor, only temporary listeners, basically distracted and essentially uninterested. Where there is no friend, there may be people aplenty who need my service, but there is no one there because of whom life is glorious for me and dying is impossible.

The loss of a friend is not a gap in the environment; it is a gouge in the heart forever. Nothing replaces a lost friend because when a friend goes, a door in my own life closes that can never be opened by anyone else again. The poet William Blake knew the problem well, I think. He wrote: "Thy friendship oft has made my heart to ache; do be my enemy — for friendship's sake."

Without friendship, life limps along on the mechanics of love but lacks its soul.

Friendship can exist in marriage, that is true. But what is dangerously more true is that marriage cannot exist without friendship even if that marriage never ends. Friendship is what we need to know about marriage. When the chemistry changes and the honeymoon turns to the mortgage, if there is no friendship, there is no marriage. Time won't do it. Children won't do it. Traditionalism won't do it. Equality and synergy are the only things that will make a marriage a friendship and make a friendship love.

Two things eat away at the human heart and block the development of love in us. One is narcissism and the other is lack of self-esteem. The narcissists believe, though they would seldom say it, perhaps, that they were born to have people wait on them. This is the man who "helps around the house" and "babysits the kids one night a week so the wife can go out." This is the woman who pouts and whines because

“he never does anything nice” for her but never does anything nice for herself either. Making her happy, she thinks, is his job. These people give someone else the responsibility for their lives and consume everything in sight for their own purposes. They take and take and take and give nothing back. They want marriages with “roles” clearly defined to suit them.

The other barrier to holy friendship is low self-esteem. What we do not have within us we do not have to give another. All we can do is to attach ourselves to someone else for refuge or for identity. Neither attachment is enough to deserve an eternity of affection. And so, soon or late, clearly or imperceptibly, the relationship unravels and is seen for what it is: a skeleton of a partnership. When a marriage is designed so that one life must be lost so that the other can be lived, marriage has become a misnomer for domestication.

Ironically enough then, a friendship that is not independent is not a friendship at all. And more important than that, perhaps, in today’s confusion of sex roles and self-development, a marriage that depends on the obliteration of one of the partners is no partnership at all. She is more than a mother; she is a person with talents and ideas. He is more than a provider; he is a man with feelings and fears. A marriage based on friendship provides the possibility for both and stifles neither.

“Marriage,” Joseph Barth wrote, “is our last best chance to grow up.” It is, in other words, our golden hope for fulfillment in a union that commits but does not bind, that links but does not limit us from becoming the person that each of us was meant to be.

The spiritual effects of love are legion, but three have special meaning. To know love is to know trust that is dizzy and free. Once we have loved one other we are capable of loving the world. Once we have discovered unexpected treasure

we presume to find it everywhere. Then love becomes a natural resource, an element of the universe, an energy that I learn to mine from person to person in my life.

But if seeing glory in someone else is our invitation to appreciate the glory in the whole world, then a sense of God’s marvels in me is an invitation to understand the meaning of heaven here. Right here and now. To be loved by someone is to become new again, to know the gleam that comes with being worthwhile, to discover what it is to be wonderful.

“What does your fiancée like about you?” the mother asked her moonstruck son.

“She thinks I’m handsome, talented, clever, and a good dancer,” he said dreamily.

“And what do you like about her?” the mother said.

“That she thinks I’m handsome, talented, clever, and a good dancer!” the boy said.

The message is only partially untrue. Love not only saves us from the smallness of ourselves and gives us the courage to risk ourselves on others. Love teaches us as well the grandeur of a God who does miracles through the unlikely likes of a limited me. It gives us esteem, admiration, regard, and respect. Love makes us feel beautiful, feel regal. It lifts us out of the humdrum of the ordinary to crown us with surprise and fullness of life. It brings with it a cataract of approval and pride and affirmation and attention that makes long days easy and hard times possible. Love enables us to love ourselves, the fundamental preparation for being able to love anybody else.

Finally, love shows us into the heart of God. The Hasidic masters tell the story of the rabbi who disappeared every Shabat Eve, “to commune with God in the forest,” his congregation

thought. So one Sabbath night they deputed one of their cantors to follow the rabbi and observe the holy encounter. Deeper and deeper into the woods the rabbi went until he came to the small cottage of an old Gentile woman, sick to death and crippled into a painful posture. Once there, the rabbi cooked for her and carried her firewood and swept her floor. Then when the chores were finished, he returned immediately to his little house next to the synagogue.

Back in the village, the people demanded of the one they'd sent to follow him, "Did our rabbi go up to heaven as we thought?"

"Oh, no," the cantor answered after a thoughtful pause, "our rabbi went much, much higher than that."

The rabbi's message sears the soul: Love is not for our own sakes. Love frees us to see others as God sees them.

To love is to come to see beyond and despite good taste, good sense, and good judgment. Love sees us as we are, as we really are, and as we can be, as well.

Love sees little but good in us and forgives everything that is not. We watch it happen every day and, from a dry and loveless perch in our desiccated souls, pronounce it ridiculous when, perhaps, we should proclaim it holy. Foolish love, in fact, may be all we ever know of the love of God on earth and, in the end, it will be everything that each of us needs. In the end it will indeed be "the bridge, the survival, the meaning."



Week Three



A Time to Sow and a Time to Reap
(Mark 4:26-32, "A Time to Sow" in There is a Season)

Preparing for your time together:

- Attend worship on Sunday, March 24th or listen to the sermon from that day on line prior to your meeting.
- Read and reflect on Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
- Read Mark 4:26-32 at least once a day for each of the seven days prior to your meeting together.
- Read Joan Chittister's essay "A Time to Sow"
- For the agricultural revolution to take place some hunter/gatherer had to have the audacity to take perfectly good food and bury it in the ground. The grain or seed had to be cast off, seemingly wasted, in order for it to produce more food. To sow a seed is like taking the risk of hope. What "seeds of hope" are you currently sowing?

Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. Open your session together by sharing about the "seeds of hope" you are currently sowing. In what ways are you taking risks hope that are investments in the future?
2. Most of the fourth chapter of Mark is about seeds. It begins with the parable of the sower and the various types of soil and includes the two parables about seeds that comprise the text for this session. What is Jesus main point in the parables in Mark 4:26-32? What is he saying about the basic character of the Kingdom of God?
3. In what ways have you seen the greatness of God's Kingdom grow out of something that initially seems insignificant?
4. In "A Time to Sow", Joan Chittister writes:
Life, Ecclesiastes leads us to understand, is not about change; life is about sowing. And therein lie both the struggle and the gift. The function of each succeeding generation is not to demand change; it is to prepare for it. The function of one generation is to make change possible for the next. The real function of each generation is to sow the seeds that will make a better world possible in the future".
In what ways are you frustrated by or impatient with the seeming insignificance or ineffectiveness of the seeds you are sowing? Discuss the various ways you might encourage one another in the slow work of sowing the seeds of the Kingdom.
5. Spend some time in silence and then have someone read John 12:24. Silently meditate on this saying of Jesus and then pray for one another as a way of encouraging one another to persevere in the work of faithfully sowing seeds of hope.

A TIME TO SOW



he philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer made an observation that for all intents and purposes has become the theme of the modern world.

“Change alone,” he wrote, “is eternal, perpetual, immortal.” And sure enough, in an age driven by computer technology, global communications, and interplanetary exploration, change has become the modern mantra of a fast-paced world. It pulses under the culture like an artery in spasm. Change propels our daily decisions beyond old concerns for quality to new preoccupations with improvement. We don’t buy furniture to last a lifetime anymore; we buy with an eye to remodeling it or adapting it or to maintaining its resale value.

The thought of constant change colors our sense of the future. We wear it like a logo as we race

from experience to experience, from place to place, and now, in our time, from idea to idea, from concept to concept, from social revolution to social revolution.

A culture that once took equilibrium for certain now takes change for granted. We may, in fact, take it far too much for granted.

Change, after all, is not a given. Change follows in the wake of something that preceded it, quiet as a shift in wind. It does not just happen; it is not a timed process. “If we’re just patient; if we just wait long enough, it has to come,” we say when we do not want to be responsible ourselves for the change. But change does not just come; change is brought somehow.

Change comes with the coming of critical mass, with the unrelenting build-up of circum-

stances until the circumstances themselves cry to heaven for attention.

Wanting the end of slavery did not bring it. People who were willing to die for freedom brought it. Waiting for the fall of monarchy did not assure it. Thinkers who spent their lives exploring the philosophy of human institutions planted the seeds that led to its downfall and made other systems possible. Desegregation did not just come. Martin Luther King marched thousands of people through the cities of this nation to get it. Suffrage for women did not just come. Grandmothers went to jail to get it. Vietnam did not just end. Young people left the country or took to the streets in droves to stop it. The Berlin Wall did not just fall. People dismantled it. The Polish Communist government did not just decide to negotiate with the citizenry after years of authoritarianism. Thousands of workers formed Solidarity, the trade union that brought down a brutal state. "Time changes nothing," the proverb teaches. "People do."

Depending on time to provide a life free of anguish and full of opportunity for beaten women and poor children does not create it. Women and men who expose themselves to derision and ridicule, thanks to their work for equality and liberation, provide the impulse that makes for social change. Peace does not come by preparing for war. Peace comes because people din our hearts with the raw truth of our own participation in human brutality. They march in public and spend long years in jail on our behalf until finally they manage to drag us back from the brink of our warring hearts by standing there, the fire of conscience in our frozen souls.

No, wanting the perfect job, the loving family, a just society, the balanced life, a renewed church does not guarantee the good life, the new world, the revolution, the Jesus life. Change, real change, the kind of change that touches the

soul as well as the environment, is not instantaneous. It is slow and labored and painful. It does not come easily; it exacts a price; it demands a dull commitment. Ecclesiastes in its commitment to the singular process of preparedness is very clear about that.

Life, Ecclesiastes leads us to understand, is not about change; life is about sowing. And therein lie both the struggle and the gift. The function of each succeeding generation is not to demand change; it is to prepare for it. The function of one generation is to make change possible for the next. The real function of each generation is to sow the seeds that will make a better world possible in the future. "Let us plant dates even though those who plant them will never eat them," Rubem Alves wrote. "We must live by the love of what we will never see. . . . Such disciplined love is what has given prophets, revolutionaries, and saints the courage to die for the future they envisaged. They make their own bodies the seed of their highest hope." Even in the face of the impossible, we must act as if the miracle will come tomorrow. That's what sowing is all about. It requires trying when hope is thin and faith is stretched and opposition is keen.

An Arab proverb teaches: "Every morning I turn my face to the wind and scatter my seed. It is not difficult to scatter seeds but it takes courage to go on facing the wind." The ability to stand steadfast in the face of opposition is the real charism of the sower. The commitment to say a different truth in the face of those who call you liar is the virtue of the sower. The willingness to sow seed on barren ground, on rock, and in thorn bushes is the prophetic task of the sower. Today, for instance, the American people lament the state of the American school system and the lack of health care programs and the loss of employment opportunities as one form of economic development yields to another. Yesterday, however, they said nothing about the amount of money that went into militarism. Yesterday

countless numbers of men wanted to advance in the company and double their salaries. Today their children are gone from home before they ever got to know their fathers, and there is little left on which to spend all the extra money they finally earned. Today too many women still bemoan the loss of half their lives but for a thousand yesterdays spent themselves being pleasers and helpers, dependents who, living vicariously, never learned to live at all. What the world really needed through all these periods were people who were willing to cry out forever unheard, if necessary, until the world had ears to hear. Clearly, what we want for tomorrow we will have to begin doing today. That is what sowing is all about.

Sowing, however, is a tedious task whose enemy is the need to succeed. It took thousands of years, for instance, to eliminate slavery — and hundreds of them were spent here in “the land of the free, the home of the brave,” where people could not, would not, see that the humans in front of them were really human. Governments legislated for slavery; businesses depended on it; churches theologized it. And generation upon generation upon generation who wanted to be loyal to the government, successful in business, pious in their churches went along with the thinking, went along with the sin of sacramentalized slavery when, with half a teaspoon of a sower’s courage, they could have been planting new questions in the human soul.

Nor has the situation changed much. We are only now beginning to doubt the morality and inevitability of nuclear war. The idea of the genuine equality of women is embarrassingly recent — and in too many places has yet to be accepted. Indeed, it is a world in need of sowing.

There are obstacles to sowing, though. Sowing taxes the energy of the soul. Sowing takes a long, long time. Those who sow must be pre-

pared never to see the result of their work. Results they must leave to a generation of harvesters. For now there is only the long, tiresome chore of starting small seeds in dark ground and waiting to see what, if anything, grows. The process is a long and empty one. No bands blare for the solitary sower. No festivals celebrate the process of imagining.

Tedium exhausts the person of ideas. Telling and retelling the idea to hostile audiences and skeptical friends and outraged neighbors and traditionalist congregations and heartsick families takes its toll on the spirit. “What’s the use . . . Eat, drink, and be merry,” is the temptation that comes too often, too easily to those whose lot in life is to sow on arid ground.

The spirituality of the sower, then, is the spirituality of urgent patience. They demand for now what others do not even know is lacking. People listen but do not believe or people do not listen at all. People listen and scoff. People listen and argue. People listen and yawn. People listen and reason the unreasonable. It is too painfully true: the business of changing the world one heart at a time requires the courage of the mountain climber who goes alone where none have been to plant the flag of the human possibility that no one sought.

It is not an easy thing, this sowing the seeds of the next human frontier, the next layer of moral imagination in the always unfinished and frustratingly ongoing process of creation. Those who need to know success need not apply. Sowing is for people of conscience only, for people who cannot live with themselves if they live on a lesser level than they know in their hearts life is really meant to be. They deal with ridicule; they feel rejection; they know the dalliness of defeat.

Sowers must believe in the “fullness of time.” “Jesus came,” the Evangelist explains, “when all things were in the fullness of time.” When

everything was ready. When the confluence of consciousness, need, possibility, and charismatic personalities were all in place, were all at the moment of precious perfection. When the ground was good and the field was tilled and the water was abundant and the process was right. The problem for the sower is that there is no way whatsoever to know with certainty exactly when that will ever be.

"How many snowflakes does it take to break a branch?" the snowbird asked.

"No one knows," the storm cloud answered.

"My job is simply to keep on snowing until it does."

"Ah, yes," said the snowbird sadly, "and who knows how many voices will be needed to bring peace?"

The role of the sower is simply to build up the fullness of time, to work without ceasing, never knowing when the seed will root, never quitting until it does. The sower sows even when the sowing seems in vain so that no moment is lacking in the preparation, so that not doing something does not become just as much an obstruction to the coming of the new creation as doing something contrary would be.

No doubt about it, sowing is a slow and arduous process that has all the power it takes to harden the hearts and break the spirits of those for whom desire is demand and possibility is expectation. In a culture of instantaneous results, sowing is an act of high discipline.

But sowing has its own spiritual fruits. Trust flames from a sower's heart, like sparks on an anvil. The sower lives by the light of what cannot be seen and may never come, but the sower does not desist. With a dogged devotion to the desirable but undetermined, sowers go through life sure of a God who wants better for us.

Abandonment becomes the sower's art. Life lived at the edge of the almost-but-not-really periods in life demands that we throw ourselves on an unfinished tomorrow with all the energy we have. Planting ideas and questions and possibilities in the human psyche, like planting the fields of the desert, is at best a desolate and potentially devastating moral duty. After all, the sowers may never know whether their lives really had any value at all. "If you expect to see the results of your work," the Talmud teaches, "you have simply not asked a big enough question."

Trust and abandonment mark the souls of the sowers, true. But something even more profound, perhaps, marks their lives. Sowers know conviction and know purpose in proportions largely unknown to the complacent and the uncomprehending of the world who go through life satisfied with their present and uncaring of someone else's future. It takes a focused soul to want something badly enough in the future to give all of life to preparing for it now, too often alone, too frequently ignored.

Ice-cold certitude of soul attends the sower's sanctification process. To the sowers, the goal is more compelling than its obstacles. Steady, steady presence is the color of their lives. Sowing requires the art of vision, the science of conviction. "I would rather fail in a cause I know must someday triumph," Wilkie wrote, "than succeed in a cause I know must someday fail."

The spiritual life of the sower is plagued by discouragement and failure, yes, but tinged as well by wide-eyed hope and unflappable certainty. Sowers envisioned the end of slavery and equal roles for women, for instance, before most people even saw the evils. They see a vision and are blinded by it. They fail and fail and fail only to try again.

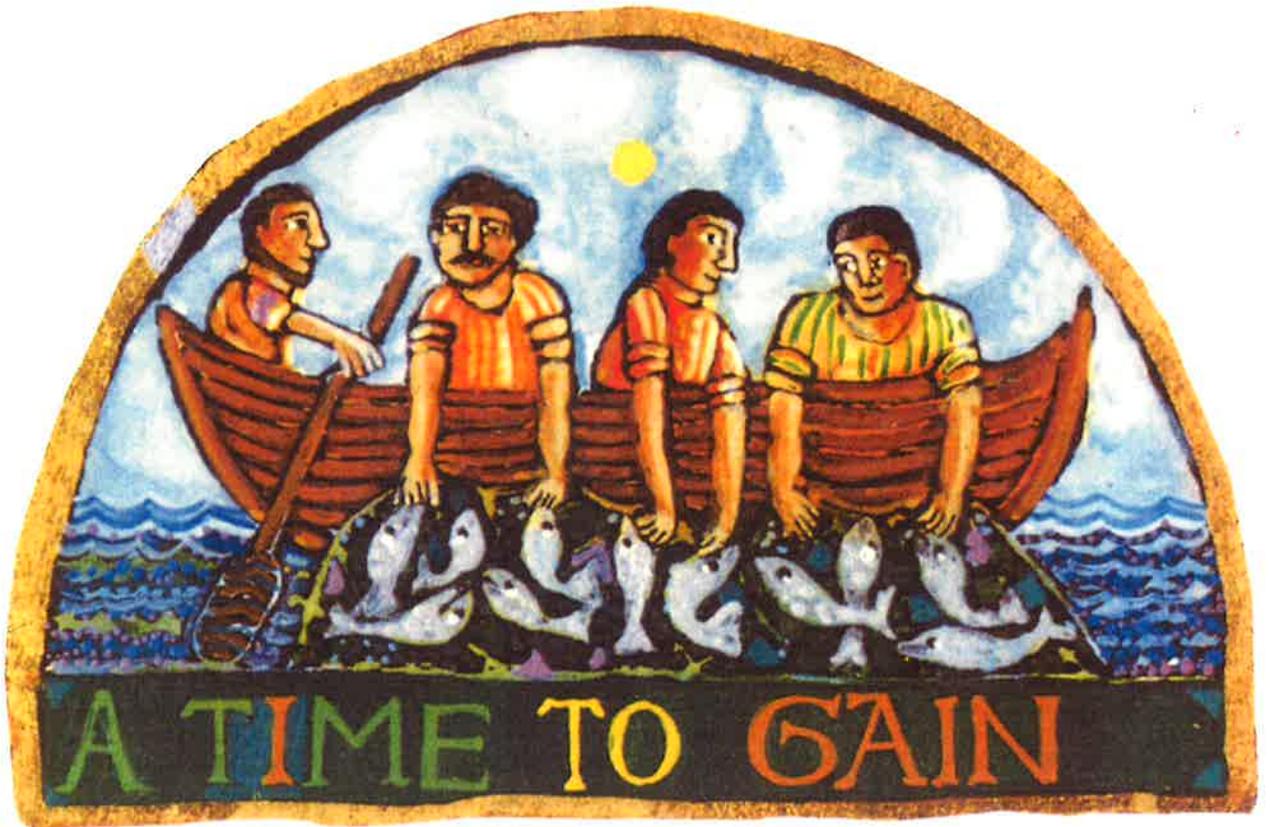
Sowers live in the mind of God and know with surety that what is not good for everyone in

the Garden is not the will of God. They stand immersed in a consciousness of the essential frailty of the human condition but committed nevertheless to the divine dream for humankind, knowing that if God wills it, then human beings are capable of it.

For the seeker with the soul of a sower, the time to sow is now. Always now. Whatever the future. However long before "the fullness of time."



Week Four



**A Time to Gain and a Time to Lose
(Luke 5:1-11, "A Time to Gain" in There is a Season)**

Preparing for your time together:

- Attend worship on Sunday March 31st or listen to the sermon from that day.
- Read and reflect on Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
- Read Luke 5:1-11 at least once a day for each of the seven days prior to your meeting.
- Read Joan Chittister's essay "A Time to Gain"
- Whether we are currently employed or long retired, building a career or delaying that quest to raise a family, we all engage in some form of work. Spend some time pondering your work. How does it enrich you? In what ways are you frustrated by it? How does your work benefit others? How does your work cut into your relationships and potentially diminish the lives of those closest to you? What about your work feels God-given? What about it feels death-dealing?

Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. Open your session together with a discussion of your personal reflections on the meaning of your work? Share with one another your various observations concerning the blessings and burdens of your work.
2. Luke 5:1-11 initially tells the story of unfulfilling or frustrating work. How does that story take a turn for the better? What do the disciples have to do to make themselves available to a different outcome?
3. What is the impact of this miracle on Peter? How does he see himself differently after being on the receiving end of this gift? Describe a time when a windfall or unexpected gift has invited you into a similar place of humility. Did this gain inspire some expression of gratitude on your part? How did that gratitude get expressed?
4. In "A Time to Gain", Joan Chittister takes a low view of capitalism and asserts: "Capitalism, the notion that individuals can have what individual can get, turns greed into virtue in this society." In what ways do you affirm or take issue with this assertion? In what ways are the gains made through free markets about something more than personal accumulation of wealth and an expression of greed? In what ways is she right about greed being the motivator that lies at the heart of the way American culture operates?
5. Chittister suggests that a time to gain is also a time to "make a difference." How has this shown itself to be true in your life? How have gains in your life challenged and equipped you to make a difference in the lives of others?
6. Spend some time in prayer for one another.

A TIME TO GAIN



nce upon a time some disciples asked their rabbi, “In the book of Elijah we read: ‘Everyone in Israel is duty bound to say, “When will my work approach the works of my ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?’” But how are we to understand this? How could we in our time ever venture to think that we could do what they could?”

The rabbi explained: “Just as our ancestors invented new ways of serving, each a new service according to their own character — one the service of love, the other that of stern justice, the third that of beauty — so each one of us in our own way must devise something new in the light of the teachings and of service and do what has not yet been done.”

It’s a lovely story. The perspective it gives takes the burden of success off our shoulders and faces us instead with the task of creative responsibility. We are not asked to do more than we can. We are not asked to be someone else. We are simply asked to be ourselves and to do something in our own time that has value. We are asked to profit the world by our existence. We are allowed to be unique; we are not allowed to be useless.

The story of co-creation is the autobiography of every human life, both yours and mine. Responsibility for the world starts here, with you, with me. Life is not about traveling through. Life

is about doing something that lasts beyond us, something that will, eventually at least, bring the world one step closer to completion. Life requires that we do more than philosophize about what the world lacks. We must do something of ourselves to provide it. Otherwise, why were we born?

This panel of *Ecclesiastes*, *A Time to Gain*, recalls a Scripture passage that is equally clear about this notion. The Twelve have labored on their boat all day long — heaving heavy, heavy nets out into the waves in the heat of the day and pulling them in empty, time after time after time. They have caught nothing where they would normally expect to find fish. But when, under the impulse of the Spirit, determined not to quit, in one last great common effort, they cast out of the other side of the boat, they haul in a net full to overflowing. They gain because they refuse to quit trying. They gain because they try different ways of doing what must be done. They gain because they keep working together. And, in the end, they bring up more fish than they could possibly use for themselves. Because of their continued and creative efforts, life is better now, more secure now, for everyone. “Work,” the Persian poet Gibran writes, “is love made visible.”

The accent is on common effort and universal gain, not on simple “self-fulfillment” and not on personal profit. The meaning is clear: We do not

work for ourselves and we do not work for nothing. We work so that others may not want. We work for the gain of the next generation. We are involved in the exercise of world-building, of co-creation and we must in each age work in new ways and in earnest and together.

Ecclesiastes puts it squarely. "There is a time to gain," it says. There is a time to make a difference. There is a time to develop the best in ourselves so that we can make the best possible world for everyone else as well.

The truth is that the most telling indicator of the spiritual deterioration of the Western world may be in its modern disregard for work. People work for money now, not for the sake of the work itself. People work so that they can do something other than work as soon as possible. People work because of economic necessity, not for the sake of creative expression. People work at compartmentalized tasks that have no meaning to them. And so, ironically enough, we have separated work and life. Work is something we do because we have to do it, not something that we want to do because it is in itself fulfilling, meaningful, life-giving. We work hard, yes, but we don't begin to live until after the workday is over. We work now only because we must, not because we want to or because the work itself compels. We work for personal profit now; we do not work for human gain or human expression. It is a sad commentary on creation.

With motives like those directing us, though, it is possible to do anything of any caliber and never even realize the moral schizophrenia to which we have fallen ill. We have arrived at a world where people can work in nuclear arms plants and never feel an ounce of compunction about the potential effects of their work. We can work in places that dump chemicals in streams and rivers and lakes and seas without a quiver of conscience. We can spend our lives hyping cigarettes and hawking alcohol and

dallying in false advertising and slick brochures about barren land and cheap trinkets and never for a moment wince at the waste. We can take "sick" days for vacation time with impunity and do sloppy work without chagrin and turn mornings into one long coffee break and accept a wage for doing it without so much as a thought. We have managed in our time to completely divorce our work from our lives. Then we wander listless for years, wondering what our lives were really all about. "We build statues out of snow," the poet Walter Scott says, "and weep to see them melt."

Yet some of the basic questions of life are "What am I doing and why am I doing it? Who profits from what I do and who does not? What difference does this work make to the coming of the reign of God?" The questions alone could change the world. They make us look again at the question of vocation and meaning, justice and complicity. They make us come face to face with new decisions about life and our own role in it. They force us to confront the myth of our own powerlessness. They bring us to the mirror of the world and ask us what we ourselves have done to make that world better or worse.

Work connects us to the rest of the world. It is our ticket to humanity, our permit to be alive. It is in our work that we share in a special way in the life of God.

Lurking within us, however, in the most hidden recesses of our souls, the obstacles to a spirituality of co-creation run deep. Comfort, alienation, powerlessness, and self-centeredness have a steel grip on the Western soul.

Capitalism, the notion that individuals can have what individuals can get, turns greed into virtue in this society. We resent subsidized housing, but we say hardly a word about the overruns and tax exemptions and sweetheart deals that keep corporate USA running. We criticize how

the poor spend their food stamps but find no problem at all in the practice of cutting corners ourselves on every tax return form we submit. We forget that God will judge the poor on honesty and us on our generosity. Without realizing it, perhaps, we use the poor of other countries to provide the slave labor costs that will put cheap goods in our own stores and no goods whatsoever in theirs.

We would like a better world, but we ourselves go on sustaining this one by our silence, by our acceptance, by our assumption that what is now must ever be. Somehow the idea escapes this generation that we have the responsibility to change it, one heart at a time. What other ages took upon themselves as the work of their lives — to build a country or educate a people or change a government or convert a world — has somehow or other been lost to our own. The goals of this age, on the contrary, have become disturbingly small. Past ages worked for the good of their children. We work for ourselves and leave our children to correct what we will leave behind — garbage in space, garbage in our waterways, nuclear garbage in our landfills. In the making of our assembly-line money, we have lost the vision that makes for holy responsibility. Indeed, we need to develop a new concept of work in the world, and we need to do it with all the workers of the world. We need to recognize the morality of work and bring conscience to bear on our own.

Industrialization began the process that computerization now hastens at breakneck speed. Torn from the land, devoid now of creative manual labor, we no longer see the results of our work. We have gone from being farmers or craftspeople who nursed their products from furrow to market every step of the way with their own hands to being robots in a line of equally isolated robots. We do not make products anymore. We count rivets or we stack paper or we handle the coins or we sweep a part of the

storeroom floor or we input segments of data. Compartmentalization has taken us over, limited our sight, robbed us of a view of what we are really doing in life. Serfs never had it so bad. Serfs saw a crop through from beginning to end, lived off of it themselves, canned it and planted it again. They knew the effects of what they did or didn't do, and they knew them in their own lives.

We, on the other hand, never see the fruits of our labor. We never really get to know the creative potential we have. We lose sight of the toxic wastes we create and the weapons we make and the corporate effects of slick deals and canny negotiations.

We don't work with people anymore. We simply work in their presence. We are on our own, doing minuscule tasks for giant corporations. We are pawns in a system of giants. It is hard to take responsibility for what we never see.

We despair of our powerlessness and go along because, we say, there is nothing else to do. We have lost our sense of importance to the human race.

But for those who can overcome the vortex of capitalist greed, the feeling of alienation from the system and the products they are producing, the sense of impotent anonymity, there is a spirituality of work waiting to be developed that can re-create this barren, starving world. "Ideals are like stars," Charles Schurz writes. "We never reach them, but like the mariners of the sea, we chart our course by them." It is the ideals of work that we are lacking. It is these ideals by which we must chart our lives and our work if either we or the world around us can ever hope to gain from our presence on earth.

A spirituality of work is based on a heightened sense of sacramentality, of the idea that everything that is, is holy and that our hands

consecrate it to the service of God. When we grow radishes in a small container in a city apartment, we participate in creation. We sustain the globe. When we sweep the street in front of a house in the dirtiest city in the country, we bring new order to the universe. We tidy the Garden of Eden. We make God's world new again. When we repair what has been broken or paint what is old or give away what we have earned that is above and beyond our own sustenance, we stoop down and scoop up the earth and breathe into it new life again, as God did one morning in time only to watch it unfold and unfold through the ages. When we wrap garbage and recycle cans, when we clean a room and put coasters under glasses, when we care for everything we touch and touch it reverently, we become the creators of a new universe. Then we sanctify our work and our work sanctifies us.

A spirituality of work puts us in touch with our own creativity. Making a salad for supper becomes a work of art. Planting another evergreen tree becomes our contribution to the health of the world. Organizing a good meeting with important questions for the sake of preserving the best in human values enhances the humanity of humanity. Work enables us to put our personal stamp of approval, our own watermark, the autograph of our souls on the development of the world. In fact, to do less is to do nothing at all.

A spirituality of work draws us out of ourselves and, at the same time, makes us more of what we are meant to be. My work develops myself. I become what I practice all my life. "Excellence," Samuel Johnson wrote, "can only be attained by the labor of a lifetime; it is not to be purchased at a lesser price."

By casting our nets one more time, by trying again when trying seems futile, we come to test the limits of our strength and know the mettle of our lives. Good work — work done with

good intentions and good effects, work that upbuilds the human race rather than reduces it to the monstrous or risks its destruction — develops qualities of compassion and character in me.

My work also develops everything around it. There is nothing I do that does not affect the world in which I live. In developing a spirituality of work, I learn to trust beyond reason that good work will gain good things for the world, even when I don't expect them and I can't see them. In that way, I gain myself. Literally. I come into possession of a me that is worthwhile, whose life has not been in vain, who has been a valuable member of the human race.

Finally, a spirituality of work immerses me in the search for human community. I begin to see that everything I do, everything, has some effect on someone somewhere. I begin to see my life tied up in theirs. I begin to see that the starving starve because someone is not working hard enough to feed them. And so I do. It becomes obvious, then, that the poor are poor because someone is not intent on the just distribution of the goods of the earth. And so I am. I begin to realize that work is the lifelong process of personal sanctification that is satisfied only by saving the globe for others and saving others for the globe. I finally come to know that my work is God's work, unfinished by God because God meant it to be finished by me.

When Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak was young, his next-door neighbor was a smith who got up before dawn every morning and struck hammer to anvil with the roar of thunder. "If this man can tear himself away from sleep so early for worldly work, should not I be doing the same for the service of the eternal God?" the young rabbi asked himself. So the following morning he rose before the smith who, as he entered his smithy, heard the young man reading his prayers in a low, clear tone.

"Listen to him work," the smith said to himself. "I must be even more diligent because I work to keep my family, not simply to develop my mind." And on the following night the smith rose even earlier than the Hasidim.

But the young rabbi took up the challenge and won the race for concentration on his work. In later years he used to say: "Whatever I have attained I owe first and foremost to a smith."

Who, if anyone, owes their sense of sanctifying work to me?



Week Five



**A Time to Break Down and a Time to Build Up
(Mark 13:1-37, "A Time to Build Up" in There is a Season)**

Preparing for your time together:

- Attend worship on Sunday April 7 or listen to the sermon from that day on line.
- Read and reflect on Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
- Read Mark 13:1-37 at least once a day for each of the seven days prior to your meeting.
- Read Joan Chittister's essay "A Time to Build Up"
- Have you ever been a part of a crew that provided relief and support to people who have experienced the devastation of a natural disaster? What did you learn by being a part of that rebuilding process?

Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss your answers to this week's reflection question. What did you learn about yourself and about the people you helped when you participated in relief work to an area hit by a natural disaster?
2. Jesus' Olivet Discourse in Mark 13 is essentially a word of warning he issues to his disciples just prior to his arrest and death. What is he telling his disciples to expect? Amidst the warning about things falling apart or being broken down how does Jesus also invite his disciples to hope? What word of advice or admonition does Jesus give his disciples as they live in anticipation of the devastation to come?
3. What Jesus doesn't say to his disciples in Mark 13 is: "Here is what is going to happen if you don't do something. Here is what I need you to do to prevent this destruction." How does the admonition to "watch" and "live in anticipation of a birth" influence the way we deal with or respond to the decay of our society?
4. When Joan Chittister discusses John August Swanson's choice to use Noah's story as an image of "a time to build up" she states:

Navigating an ark through a storm is hardly a challenge.... After all, arks float.... [But] no storm lasts forever. Sooner or later, every wind passes. Then comes the time to start over, to do better than before, to produce an alternative product—a finer idea, a truer system, a preferable institution, a gentler nation—than the one that preceded this one. It is a time of new creation, a leap into eternal darkness, a moment of truth. It is not a time for the weak and will-less. It is also seldom a time of high drama. The stuff of dailiness takes over now. Now the real work of new creation begins.

What empowers us to take on this kind of a task? How do we sustain this kind of faithful presence in our world? What resources do we need? What is God's promise to us as we seek to live into this challenge?

A TIME TO BUILD UP

Revolutions are strange things. They give us a wild sense of triumph and, at the same time, they confront us with the fragility of victory. At the very moment a revolution succeeds, all the dreaming ends and all the theories turn to dust and all the talking ceases. Suddenly, the fireworks go black in the sky. The dawn becomes daylight. The real work of revolution begins at the very moment the old world collapses.

Then, whatever the promises that fired the upheaval, they cease to be poetry and begin to be the cold, hard facts of popular politics. The hopes fade into expectations. Heroes turn to humdrum, and all the drum majors of the world are left without a band. When the revolution has been won, the task in life is no longer critique. There is no need then to lead the madding crowd to wish for brave new worlds. On the contrary, the crowds depend on them. They demand them. No, the task in life after the dramatic work of a revolution is over is not to envision possibilities; it is to make good on promises. The task in life after the revolution ends is to build up what has been torn down. The task in life when the last note of the march fades is to begin again. "Our grand business," Thomas Carlyle wrote, "is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly

at hand.” It is dailiness now that demands the work, not of dreamers, but of doers.

It is easier said than done. Ask Noah. Navigating an ark through a storm is hardly a challenge. People know a storm when they see one and flee it blindly whatever way they must, however frightening the manner of retreat. Chaos knows no fear, no reason. What people will not think of doing in ordinary time, they do without thinking in difficult times. After all, arks float. Cramped quarters are better than no quarters at all. Sacrifice abounds at a time of social upheaval. Any amount of effort, all manner of endurance, is possible. Nothing is too much to ask of people for whom the good life has become more rumor than fact. But that kind of character outlives itself quickly, exhausts itself post-haste when the gust turns and the pressure falls. Then there is a condition worse than suffering, and that is peace.

No storm lasts forever. Sooner or later, every wind passes. Then the time comes to start over, to do better than before, to produce an alternative product — a finer idea, a truer system, a preferable institution, a gentler nation — than the one that preceded this one. It is a time of new creation, a leap into eternal darkness, a moment of truth. It is not a time for the weak and will-less. It is also seldom a time of high drama. The stuff of dull dailiness takes over now. Now the real work of the new creation begins.

Noah knew the situation only too well. Life may not have been good for him in Nod but it was at least familiar. It was at least stable. It was his roots and his identity, his past and his future, his personal piece of the planet. It may not have been its greatest moment, its finest era, perhaps, but it was, after all, his.

Who does not know the dilemma; who hasn't been in the situation? “This may not be the best place in the world,” we say, “but it is better than most.” So we put up with a great deal

of mindless immorality masking as the human condition. We tolerate the intolerable in our personal lives until we have no other choice, until blindness gives way to vision, until our sense of justice outdoes our sense of complacency, until we cannot take our nation, our family, our business, our church for granted one minute longer. Now our choices clarify with frightening simplicity: we must either accept what is or we must do it better. That is precisely what happened to Noah. Faced with a choice between irreconcilable alternatives, he had to choose one. “I do not believe in a fate that falls on human beings however they act; but I do believe in a fate that falls on them unless they act,” G. K. Chesterton wrote. The situation is a serious one.

“A righteous man,” the Scripture calls Noah. And a foolish one perhaps. He heard the Word of God within himself and determined to leave a decaying world behind him. A noble endeavor, indeed, but a very lonesome one for a person who had grown up in the situation and had managed, obviously, to resist the impulse to change for so long. The social climate had not eroded overnight, after all. Someone, Noah among them surely, had seen the circumstances that spawned the cultural disintegration and corruption and decline for years and had chosen to ignore them.

Suddenly, Noah not only finds himself in strange territory that is literally over his head, but he finds himself alone in it as well. He becomes Noah of the cocktail-party circuit whose conversation is no longer acceptable; Noah, the dissenter on the staff; Noah, the parishioner whose parish priest considers him mad; Noah, the strange man-about-town with an idea too radical to be believed. Poor Noah. If we have ever done a thing in our lives just a hair's breadth ahead of the crowd, we know him all too well. We know the uncertainty that goes with being a visionary-without-portfolio while the crowds clamor for dry land in the middle of floodwaters thick with the debris of the past.

There comes a time, in other words, when criticism of the past is simply not enough. There comes a new moment in life when we must dedicate ourselves to creating the future. And that is hard, hard work.

At that moment, we discover the difference between rabble-rousers and leaders, between critics and prophets, between the malcontents in an organization and the monumentally committed. Unfortunately, the discovery is often made far too late in the game. In looking for light, we find that we have followed a shooting star that is without substance and on its way to nowhere.

Tearing down the Berlin Wall was one thing; going about the process of rebuilding a totally demoralized and disenfranchised people is entirely another. Deinstitutionalizing the mentally ill was one thing; emptying the city parks of the emotionally sick and unwanted who congregate there because the closing of psychiatric hospitals leaves them nowhere else to go has turned out to be entirely another. Desegregating educational systems by bussing children out of their neighborhoods was one thing; equalizing educational programs so that inner-city schools have the same kind of facilities and programs as the schools in the suburbs has been entirely another. Writing papers on the lay vocation was one thing; incorporating women and laity into the structures of the church has turned out to be a disheartening other. Proclaiming the demise of sexism was one thing; reshaping the patriarchal marriage has turned out to be the formidable other. No doubt about it: revolution is the easy part. Rebuilding is the spiritual gift.

Rebuilding is one of the charisms of creation. This time, however, God does not do the re-creating; Noah does. It is Noah's task now to save the human race from the disaster they have made of it. God does not wipe the world out and create it anew out of better material this time. On the contrary. God simply sends some-

one else to try again with the very same kind of creatures that were used in the first creation. And therein lies the lesson. To rebuild means to do it with the very same people who corrupted a situation in the first place, if not by debauching it themselves, at least by going along with the tide.

The obstacles to rebuilding, to renewing, to revitalizing a decadent system, then, are transparent ones. In the first place, we ourselves are products of the last system. Finding the openness of heart to imagine the possibility of a full gospel, a just world, an honest government, a nonsexist institution, a marriage of equals, a church where there is really "no Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free, no male nor female," muddles the mind. We are as crippled as what crippled us. Only we do not know it. And if we can bring ourselves to propose such a system, we can almost never imagine what the world would look like without the essential features of the old one. We stew in the juices of the past and want change, but what we really want is "planned" change; we want revolution as long as it's a "nice" revolution, or we demand a "new" world but not too new a world. We are by nature victims of the blindness of our own making, not rebuilders at all.

Rebuilding takes a peculiar kind of courage as well. It takes a gambler's heart and makes it holy. Rebuilders have to be willing to lose because they do not have a clue what it really means to win or where they're going if they do. They must be prepared to stumble around from failure to failure — from raven to dove — until something finally works and people are finally safe again, finally better off than they were before, finally free enough of the past to create life anew. To be a rebuilder means to risk failure time and time again, means to risk the support of the crowd you set out to save, means to be left in the dust as a crazy-eyed charlatan or a starry-eyed visionary, both useless, both dangerous. Guizot said of this dimension of the process of

social change, "It is only after an unknown number of unrecorded labors, after a host of noble hearts have succumbed in discouragement, convinced that their cause is lost; it is only then that cause triumphs."

Rebuilding means to launch an entire people into space without a map and no way whatsoever to land again if and when anything goes wrong with the trip. So much for the French Revolution; so much for the great Communist experiment; so much for poet-princes in a politician's world. Once a person starts down the road of revolution, rebuilding becomes the price of perception and the cost of the dream. And woe to those who fail.

There is great spiritual merit in being a rebuildler, though. Rebuilders are those who take what other people only talk about and make it the next generation's reality. These are the superstars of the long haul. These are the people who pay with their lives to make an idea an actuality. They give up prestige and money and being the Peter Pans of the public arena for the long, hard struggle of turning their personal little worlds on their tiny axles. They build the new world right in the heart of the old. They begin to use altar girls when the first girls ask to serve. They start to provide social service and compassionate presence to AIDS patients at the first sight of suffering, whatever the moral conclusions of the moralists around them. They show us the world that the rest of us do not want to see until, forced to see it, we can ignore it no longer.

Some people go through life dispensing ideas that they never then bother to en flesh or that they abandon at the first hint of opposition. Armchair critics sprinkle their judgments liberally through life and then move on quickly to criticize the next effort of the next persons who, Noah-like, embark on a braver path. They always know what's wrong with any element of the human estate. They seldom, if ever, on the other hand, provide a better solution to the problem

themselves. Their forte is questions, not answers. Rebuilders, on the other hand, show a better mettle.

To the rebuildler, life is one long spiritual exercise in co-creation. Sanctification depends for them on doing, always doing, whatever is necessary to prod the world one step closer to the reign of God, one idea nearer to the vision of God, one moment closer to the will of God.

Rebuilders are artists of the soul who shape a piece of human creation and leave the results to the kiln of time. They do not claim to have all the answers. They claim to honor the questions. They are prepared to float forever, if necessary, to find a better world, to shape a finer piece of the planet.

No amount of ridicule can discourage the rebuildlers. No degree of rejection deters them. Rebuilders have a goal in life too finely honed to be abandoned for something so sniveling as thoughtless censure. But ridicule, rejection, and censure are commonly their kingdom nevertheless. For the zealots of the society, they are too slow. For the conservatives of the group, they are too fast. For the orthodox of the world, they are heretics. Their lot is too often, too plainly a lonely one. They are followed as heroes by some and tracked as traitors by others. They die as failed messiahs and vanquished enemies. They cannot possibly succeed because what they set out to build is not the damaged structures of a people seeking shelter but the plastic hearts of a people gone too long without anything of substance to love. They work with a people who know what was wrong with what went before but who are, at base, bereft of the longevity of spirit it will take to replace it with better. Rebuilders face grey roads on dark nights that go nowhere that anyone has ever seen.

The soul of a rebuildler is based on the ability to look lovingly into nothingness and know that there is something there worth going to, worth

giving this life to doing so that the lives of those that follow can be better still.

Rebuilders are commonly misunderstood, misjudged, and misnamed. They are called "reformers," "liberators," and "leaders," when, as a matter of fact, they are simply lovers gone wild with hope. Consequently, rebuilding is a sad but glorious task. Many the rebuilder who has died with a broken heart, sure that they had failed when the truth of the matter is that one lifetime is simply not enough span for anyone to succeed in reconstructing an entire culture gone to dust. Rebuilders are those characters of history who rise long after their deaths in the purple haze of tenacity. Eventually the world remembers them as the rethinkers, the redefiners, the rejuvenators of the world who carried it across the broken bridges of the past to the empty shores of a tenuous new era. Too late for the rebuilder then to know the beauty of being determined beyond all proof of possibility but not too late for the rest of us. In the rebuilders of the world, the rest of us can see the power of vision and the implacability of prophetic patience

when our own lives seem to have stumbled and stalled. Rebuilders teach us that "courage is fear that has held on one minute longer."

Rebuilders look to the rainbow with the eye of a Noah. They intend to save as well as to flee, to begin as well as to end, to repeat the good things of life in a higher key. They do not deter easily, and because of them the human spirit has lived on from one human fiasco to the next, always better, always with the faith of the unfalteringly simple who have heard the word of God and been foolish enough to believe, as George Bernard Shaw said, "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."



