

THE Divine Work OF Wasting Time

I think my daughter's hamster just died. Actually, it may have died a couple of days ago, but no one's been paying attention. Yesterday it was curled up inside the little hutch inside its cage. I assumed it was sleeping since it was daytime and hamsters are nocturnal. But last night I didn't hear it running in its wheel. And when I looked at the hutch just now, it was still curled up in the same spot.

If the hamster were a person, I'm sure we'd be concerned or even incensed that no one was paying attention. Death had come and no one noticed! That story is repeated all too often these days. Last summer I heard a radio news report on the heat that was afflicting the nation. The reporter reminded people to check on their neighbors, especially elderly persons living alone, in case they had collapsed from heat-related illness.

Why do we need to be reminded of this? Because we spend so little time together.

In his book *Body Politics*, Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder describes "breaking bread" as much more than a ritualized, symbolized portion of the Last Supper that we reenact once a week or month or quar-

ter. He argues that breaking bread for the early church was a full-on common meal. It was a potluck that had to be planned and organized. People had to prepare food and serve it. And somebody had to clean up. Because the early Christians did this regularly, even daily, it had a profound effect on them. It re-organized the way they looked at each other and at the world. In order for everyone to get enough to eat, they even had to change their leadership structure and invent new positions of leadership (see Acts 6 and the origin of the office of deacon).

In our church community we've come to realize that the small groups that are strongest are those who eat together regularly, even if it's only once a month. The shared meal means there is extended time together that is unstructured. You find out what's happening in people's lives—whose kid is struggling in school, who needs a new car, what their last vacation was like.

On the other hand, small group advocates usually instruct that time together be very intentionally structured so that people don't feel like they're wasting their time ("group warm up: five minutes"). Time is seen as a precious commodity, something that must be "spent wisely." Such

thinking implies that time belongs to me, that I am the lord of my schedule. Unstructured time seems wasteful.

But maybe that's the point. Mary wasted expensive perfume on Jesus's feet. In the same way, shared life with other believers is a way of lavishing time on those whom Jesus loves. It is an act of worship. The pragmatists cry, "Wasteful!" but God calls it worshipful.

Getting back to the hamster, I am separated from it by a cage. It has its own hamster life and I have my superior human life. The cage is for my convenience, so I can control my time (imagine the time that would be needed to keep the hamster under control without a cage). But the result is that if it's inconvenient for me to spend too much time with the hamster I can shut it out of my life. I just need to make sure there's food and water in the cage. And I may just barely notice if it's alive or not.

As a pastor, I am expected to offer insight, guidance, comfort, and courage. Yet society puts us in cages that separate us from each other. This is for our convenience, so we can control our time better. After all, we don't like it when others intrude on our time without our permission. But



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that means we live most of our lives in isolation. We poke our noses through the bars using email or the phone (it used to be called “the next best thing to being there”) or Facebook or Twitter. With social media we get to choose when we go online or when we call. But we usually remain safely ensconced in our cages so we can control our time better.

We have very few venues for shared life. And I have very few venues for fulfilling my pastoral vocation. Of course, Sunday morning is important, partly because that's when we observe the Lord's Table as a regular part of our eighty- to ninety-minute worship service. But after that I feel like I'm intruding on someone's life if I just drop in. If I unexpectedly pay a visit to find out what's happening in their lives, to help them discern how God is at work in their lives, or to help them cooperate with that work, I might be barging in and disrupting their schedule. Instead, I am supposed to email or call first. Then if we can find an opening in our schedules (which need to be very full, lest we appear to be lazy and unproductive) we put it on our calendars. Only then can I show up at the appointed time. Gone are the days of the pastor walking around

his parish and being invited in to talk with the blacksmith as he shoes his horse or with the homemaker as she hangs out the laundry.

If those occupations sound antiquated to you, that's because they pretty much don't exist in most of America. Neither does the notion of life together, of sharing moments that are given to us by God—as opposed to being in control of those moments so we can be as productive as possible.

That change is reflected in the design of our houses. Gone are the front porches that invite conversation. The most prominent feature of a recently built house today is often the garage, into which we drive and then click the remote to close the door so we can go inside and get on with whatever's next on our calendar.

I believe we need to quit seeing work solely as something that we produce and start seeing work as something that God is doing in us and through us. Author Peter Scazzero points out that the origin of the word “office” in the phrase “divine office” is the Latin word *opus*, or *work*. The work is divine because it is God's work, not ours. Devotions used to be time for us to let God work in us,

rather than a religious duty that we could check off our to-do list.

If God is going to do his work among us as his church, then we need to spend time together. Not just weekly structured time doing churchy activities, but less structured time engaged in the stuff of everyday life. We need to study together, work together, relax together, even play together. What better way to start than with common meals, with “breaking bread” together? It's countercultural, but it's a way to start taking down the cages that we have built around us.

The church is called not merely to make sure our neighbors are still alive, but to be a place where people are truly concerned for each other and helping each other to find their place in God's purposes in the world. That is how we show people that the kingdom of God is the best vision of human flourishing. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35, TNIV).

I'm going to go check on the hamster. ■

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