

Week Two - The Altar of Productivity

Assigned Reading: Chapter 2

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 8

1 To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven: **2** A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; ... **8** A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.”

Luke 10:38-42

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. **39** She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. **40** But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” **41** But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; **42** there is need of only one thing.[1] Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Brief Summary:

Kate continues her journey and expresses that due to her illness her relationship with time changes completely. She writes, “Those circles under my eyes are now a deep purple. We cannot speak it, but the truth hangs over us—that those who cannot fight back must race against time.” (24). Her diagnosis changes her relationship with time. She says this about time: “I used to experience time as productivity. Consulting checklists and packing lunches and yelling “Remember to pick up laundry detergent!” to no one in particular. I had invested heavily in the science of efficiency (28). Kate feels the limits of time and she says to her husband Toban, “I have so much work I want to get done! Why? Why is this happening to me?”

Kate reflects upon her life. She names that before her illness she would worship at the “altar of productivity.” Now though, everything has changed. She writes, “In this new economy of scarcity I am skipping arguments, holding my tongue, sorting through the unfinished past for things that need to be said before it’s too late. I am writing down internet passwords and canceling subscription services. In all my years learning the biorhythms of the “perfect day,” conquering the morning routine, and charting my workflow, I had been racing toward the future along a single mental track. But now I must lay an entirely separate mental track headed straight for a cliff, and I find myself weighing each decision based on when I believe the road will end.

Kate devises two rules during this difficult time: a rule to carefully engage any content that will make her sad and a rule of gratitude where she writes down all that she is thankful for. At the end of the chapter, Kate is reading to her son Zach and pondering time, thinking about all she could possibly miss in his life.

Discussion Questions:

1. In your own words, how would you summarize Kate's relationship with time? How does it change? Can you relate to her experience? If so, how?
2. In this chapter Kate critiques what she describes as her own worship of the "altar of productivity."
 - a. How do you understand her critique?
 - b. How does productivity shape our sense of self-worth?
 - c. How is productivity helpful in our lives, but how can it also be misleading?
3. Our passage from Ecclesiastes describes a different sense of time.
 - a. Do we ever focus so much on productivity that we miss moments of meaning, and even God's presence?
 - b. How might this passage from Ecclesiastes challenge our sense of control?
4. How do you read the story of Mary and Martha?
 - a. Do you see Martha as distracted?
 - b. Do you see Mary as focusing on the right things?
 - c. What do you make of the advice of Jesus who says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing." What is that "one thing" that Jesus is referring to?
5. How might Kate's changing understanding of time, as well as Christ's advice to Mary and Martha, change how we live in the season of Lent?

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