

## The Weight of Our Faithful Living

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

11 September 2022

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Texts: 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:11-32

*“Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”*

~ Luke 15:29-30

### Prayer

Holy God,

**We come here this morning out of our busy lives**

**To gather in your Presence.**

**We come to be with one another –**

**To give thanks for the gift of faith,**

**And to listen to a Word that sounds radically different from  
the sounds and noises in our world.**

**Speak to us this morning, O God,**

**And energize us so we may worship and serve you**

**With all our heart, strength, mind, and time. Amen.**

If you had only one week to live at your present mental capacity and physical ability, what would you do with your last 7 days on Earth?

As odd as it may sound, this question popped into my head on the last leg of my trip back from Brazil while the plane, which had just landed at Logan, was taxiing to the gate. An older woman in the seat in front of me had been chatting with the flight attendant during landing about her excitement and gratitude for the opportunity to see her daughter and three grandchildren whom she had seen in-person only once since she got her COVID vaccines and boosters. As we got closer to the gate, the flight attendant asked if the woman's grandchildren would also be at the airport to welcome their grandmother. Unsurprisingly – and that feeling of not being surprised at all stuck with me for a while – the grandmother told the flight attendant that it was very unlikely her grandchildren, ages 7, 10 and 12, would have time to come to the airport. ***“They’re busier than their parents,”*** the woman noted. ***“When I was a child,”*** the grandmother said somewhat nostalgically, ***“We went home after school and played with our friends. Nowadays, the kids have so much going on that when I visit, we have to plan when I can spend time with them.”***

I exited the aircraft with the words of author Annie Dillard echoing in my head, “***How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.***”<sup>1</sup> As hopeful as many of us were that the time of physical isolation imposed on us by the pandemic might change dramatically the way we choose to spend our days, it appears that we are right back at the way things were before. We are all busy again. Over-scheduled. Planning every day of our kids’ weeks in the hope that they will be as successful as we are at being privileged and busy. Coming up with more fall events to put on our family Google Calendars. Stretching our to-do-lists. Adding a few extra hours to our workday to get more accomplished. Spending more time hunched over our laptops or commuting again back and forth to work. Multi-tasking while we attend Zoom meetings. Trying to squeeze in another trip, one more project, another after-school activity, one more task, into our already packed schedules to try to make the most of our days and weeks. Once again, we are ordering our lives and prioritizing our time to do our best to stay on top of the things we deem important or necessary to live a good life while we agonize over the feeling that our time is limited, and we can’t do everything we would like to do. We are once again choosing to spend our lives busy, striving to meet all our obligations at work, seeking to keep pace with what is happening at home, and hoping to discover the magic time management recipe that might allow us to enjoy the fullness of life that we dream about, work for, and long to have, but that still eludes us.

Oliver Burkeman, a British journalist and author, suggests in his fascinating book “*Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*,” that our “***busyness epidemic***,” which is a direct result of the lifestyle choices we make every day, comes from the pressure we put on ourselves “***to fit ever-increasing quantities of activity into a stubbornly nonincreasing quantity of daily time.***”<sup>2</sup> Burkeman makes a disquieting statement in the very first sentence of his book, “***The average human lifespan is absurdly, terrifyingly, insultingly short.***”<sup>3</sup> The lucky ones among us, like Queen Elizabeth II, who get to make it to their mid-90’s, live almost 5,000 weeks, but the average person on the planet has about 4,000 weeks of life.<sup>4</sup> None of us gets a lot of time on Earth. Human life is short even if we prefer not thinking about it. The truth is that we do not have an infinite number of days or weeks to live our lives and Burkeman says that we frequently use up our finite quantity of weeks in ways that we would rather not.<sup>5</sup>

There is a deep longing in our souls for meaning and purpose. Every human being yearns for a fulfilling life, but we created a world for ourselves that functions somewhat like a hamster wheel where we keep running to do the doable, the achievable, the immediate and seemingly urgent – things that are unquestionably needed and that keep us busy but that in the end distract us from the people, causes, institutions and things we care most deeply about and matter to us. In the hamster wheel of our own creation, we keep telling ourselves that if we spend our days emptying our inboxes, answering all the text messages, clearing the decks, cranking through all the unavoidable daily stuff that has to get done, getting all the tasks out of the way efficiently, there will come a day or a week when we will finally have more than enough time to focus on that magnificent thing or that specific plan or that weird little passion that will make us feel more radiant, more

connected with the world around us, and more alive. Unfortunately, the longer we remain in the hamster wheel distracted by our busyness, the farther those things that really matter seem to get from us.

To use our weeks well and to live a life worthy of having been lived, Burkeman advises that we embrace the brevity of our days with open hearts, accept our limitations, and step into an authentic relationship with life, understanding that the onus is on us to make the difficult choices that allow us to get off the hamster wheel to be fully present to those things that draw our attention to what is consequential, vital, essential, reality-shaping, and eternal. As the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, ***“People are drawn to what is easy and to the easiest side of the easy. But it is clear that we must hold ourselves to the difficult, as is true for everything alive.”***<sup>6</sup> To spend our days and our weeks well, we have to make the uncomfortable and hard decision to restructure our way of living by shifting our attention to those ideas, values, thoughts, teachings, places, and people that would inspire us to give them every single minute of our last week on earth because they fill our life with gladness, meaning, hope, faith, love, beauty, gratitude, awe and wonder.

Our attention is ***“the rarest and purest form of generosity”***<sup>7</sup> we can share with each other and the world, said the French philosopher Simone Weil. Oliver Burkeman agrees. Quoting a study by psychologist Timothy Wilson, Burkeman points out that ***“attention is a ‘finite resource.’”*** We have evolved to consciously attend to ***“about 0.0004 percent of the information bombarding our brains at any given moment. But to describe attention as a ‘resource’ is to subtly misconstrue its centrality in our lives. Most other resources on which we rely as individuals—such as food, money, and electricity—are things that facilitate life, and in some cases it’s possible to live without them, at least for a while. Attention, on the other hand, just is life: your experience of being alive consists of nothing other than the sum of everything to which you pay attention. At the end of your life, looking back, whatever compelled your attention from moment to moment is simply what your life will have been.”***<sup>8</sup> In other words, what you and I pay attention to defines who we are, how we live, what we value, whom we care about, what and who we worship, what orients our lives and how we spend our numbered days on Earth.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son that we heard today is a beautiful Christian text on how what we choose to pay attention to affects those around us and either frees us to live fully or keeps us trapped in an endless cycle of busy, daily routines that hollows life of joy. The two brothers in the story organize and spend their days in diametrically opposite realities even though they live under the same roof. The younger son is completely terrified of FOMO, that existential fear of missing out on something exciting, important, thrilling, and enjoyable. He spends his days thinking about the life he is unable to live. His father’s presence and property are nothing more than a kind of home confinement that he believes is holding him back and keeping him from living out his dreams. The younger brother lives mentally in the future. He cannot wait to get out of town to see the world. Day after day, his

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Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

attention gets constantly pulled away from his father and older brother as he imagines the good life that awaits him far away from his family's farm. Eventually, the younger son does the unthinkable at the time. He basically says to his father, ***"I'm sorry dad, but I cannot wait for you to die; please, give me my part of the inheritance now and let me go spend my days as I like."*** And off he goes to a distant country. But as soon as the money dries up and he has to work feeding hogs – a job that was abhorrent to any Jew, the younger son decides to head back to his father's house. The text says, ***"He came to himself."*** But it is probably fair to say that the famished, homeless, impoverished son chose ***"the easiest side of the easy."*** He chose the assurance of his father's love over a life of distractions that robbed him of his material wealth. He chose the daily routine, clean sheets, comfortable bed, home cooked meals and safety of his family's house over his FOMO.

The father, who had never given up on the hope that his son would return, runs toward him when he sees the unmistakable figure of his child on the horizon. The old man throws his arm around his dirty and half-starved son. He kisses him. His love for his child is almost beyond comprehension. My brother told me that when he saw his first son for the very first time, he was so overwhelmed by love that he never thought he could love another human being so much. This is the kind of love that allows the father to forgive his son even before the child-who-couldn't-wait-to-get-away is able to utter a word. The father gives his son his full attention – ***"Quickly,"*** he instructs the servants ***"bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"***

The older son in the story is a bit more like us. He lives in a world of to-do-lists and spreadsheets. He never quite manages to keep up with all his tasks. Like most of us, he never gets around to achieving the perfect work-life balance. He works harder and harder every day to the point that his own sense of self-worth is totally bound up with how busy he keeps himself. This is the son who wears his busyness as a sign of pride and loyalty to his father and to his family. He constantly feels overstretched and struggles with the crushing self-brutalizing notion that busyness is what his father expects and even demands of him. He may long to spend some free time with his friends and have some semblance of a social life, but the older brother prioritizes future benefits over current enjoyment. He pushes himself harder to generate more business that can make up for the financial loss caused by his younger brother's choice to leave with part of the inheritance. The older son is dutiful and responsible to a T, but his attention is on the ***"joyless urgency"*** of his work and he is unable to nurture a meaningful human connection with his own father to understand why his dad is welcoming his younger brother home with a party and the fatted calf he had probably tended to.

The father understands his older son's reaction. In fact, the father knows that his older son's anger is not only understandable but inarguably justified. The older brother is indisputably right in his frustration. His father's love is too much. It makes forgiveness and

reconciliation look too easy. The elder brother is livid at the attention his father is lavishing on a son who squandered their hard-earned money with prostitutes in some far-away country. And once again in the story, the father leaves his house to run toward a child. Only this time, it is a child whose sense of rightness is keeping him from being glad that his father's love is so wide and deep that he can extend a loving welcome even to the other son who many would accuse of being undeserving of such love, grace, and forgiveness. Still, the father generously gives his attention to the elder son and invites him to let love and joy soften his heart - ***"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."***

We do not know if the attention the father devoted to each one of his sons was enough to heal the older brother's wounds and reunite the whole family. The story ends here. But if we go back to the first verses of chapter 15, we find out that Jesus told this story after the good religious people of his time criticized him for paying attention to tax collectors and sinners – the wrong type of people in their eyes. So I often wonder if Jesus ends the story abruptly with a bit of a dramatic cliff-hanger to give us the spiritual freedom to reflect on how each one of the people in the story makes choices that shape their limited number of weeks of life. I often wonder if Jesus hoped that we would see in the parable's loving father not necessarily a description of who God is but an invitation to all of us to choose to notice, to pay attention to each other because, when we do choose to give our full attention – ***"the rarest and purest form of generosity"*** we can offer to other people, we escape from the hamster wheel and our days become more fulfilling, more purposeful, more well lived.

A few months ago, I listened to an episode of Hidden Brain that mentioned how the first boxed cake mixes introduced in the early 1930's almost did not take off initially, despite the convenience they promised and delivered. General Mills hired the psychologist and market consultant Earnest Dichter to figure out what was going on. To everyone's surprise, Dichter discovered that the cake mixes were too convenient. People make cakes for people they care about and love. Baking a cake was for most women at the time, an act of love for their families, friends, and neighbors and there was something soulless about a cake mix. So Dichter proposed a rather simple solution. He told General Mills to take the dried eggs out of the mix and put them back into the hands of the bakers. The eggs would make the whole experience of mixing the cake mix more like baking and caring for loved ones. Guess what? The sales of boxed cake mixes finally took off.<sup>9</sup>

This is the weight of our living. Most of us want and actually long for meaning and meaningful connections with other people. It may be only the simple act of adding eggs to a cake mix, but we do want to invest our lives in activities that are life-giving and things that give us a clear sense that we are living our days well and not merely busy. Our four thousand weeks of life may not appear to be much, but our absurdly short lifespan gives us enough time to pay attention to what matters and to let Christ show us how to fill our days with the kind of love that overwhelms us with a desire to go out of our way to show

kindness, grace, care and forgiveness even, perhaps especially to those the world judges as undeserving of our love and our attention. This is one of the reasons why I still love coming to church, because here the words of Christ keep reminding me to spend my weeks, not busy in the hamster wheel, but attentive to God's love and grace that fill human hearts with purpose and the joy of being fully alive each day.

Today, I invite all of you to consider paying attention to our church. I don't know how many of you would come to church if you had only one week left to live. I don't know how many of you place coming to worship and being actively involved in the church close to the top of your life priorities, but I am deeply grateful that you are here this morning, and I hope that you will give your attention to what is going on at ACC this fall. I pray that the invitation to volunteer and be involved in the life, mission and ministries of our church will not sound to you like another task to add to your busy and unmanageable list of things to get done, but as the opportunity to follow Christ, to connect with God and with your faith community in a more personal and meaningful manner. I hope that this sacred time of worship will always be a time where you and your family will somehow be empowered, encouraged, and challenged to manage your short time on Earth well, to spend your days wisely rather than overwhelmingly busy, to pay attention to what matters and to have the courage to surprise the world by choosing what is truly life-giving.

Friends, may it be so. Amen.

By the way, I left Logan last week hoping that the grandchildren would choose to be at the airport to offer a loving welcome to their grandmother.

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard in The Writing Life, p. 31 [Kindle edition].

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Burkeman in Four Thousand Weeks, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke in Letters to a Young Poet, translated by Anita Barrows and Joana Macy, p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> Miklos Vetö in The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Oliver Burkeman in Four Thousand Weeks, p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> Hidden Brain in Work 2.0: The Obstacles You Don't See, aired in November 2021.