

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. I often see a particular phrase shared or at least the sentiment of it, quite a bit on social media and I know it exists in self-help books, inspirational videos, and printed on all of our favorite goodies like shirts and mugs. “Make every second count.”

I happened across someone posting a picture with this sentiment earlier in the week, “Each day comes with 86,400 seconds. It’s up to you to decide what to do with them.” I know this quote is meant to be inspirational but as I sat around with a little bit of extra free time for the holidays and I started to feel a bit anxious. Am I making my seconds count? The post had a caption about maximizing your earnings potential with each second you have. Are you waking up early, staying late in the office, and getting that promotion? Are you making your seconds count *for you*?

That particular quote however has a little bit different context. It actually is from the late coach Jim Valvano, most commonly known as Jimmy V. Jimmy V was known as the coach who took an extreme underdog basketball program, North Carolina State all the way to the College Basketball National Championship and won in 1983. After his time as a coach, Jimmy V would become a sports commentator and a motivational speaker. He was diagnosed with a form of metastatic cancer at the age of 47 but continued to give motivational speeches until his death after a yearlong battle.

Jimmy V talked about the ways he could continue to live his life to a full extent, spreading love and hope to as many people as possible despite going through much fear and pain. Each minute, each second of his life, he wanted to commit to God, to his family, and to so many that he spoke to, that his time could make a difference and that even simply experiencing life and emotions could give hope to a brighter future with more love for everyone just as it did for him.

The pressure to optimize the moments in life for the greatest pay off gives way to something much simpler, that each moment is a gift and a blessing, in the greatest moments and in the mundane and boring as well. Abundance is all around and even in times of scarcity; we must rely on one another. No one can make it simply on their own, outside of the support and love of community. This lesson is one that comes out clearly from the themes of our readings this morning.

The Gospel talks of an apocalyptic time where people faint from fear and disasters are ever present. I can't help but feel like the "future" nature of this reading is a little bit more slippery than it initially gives off. Indeed, as Jesus shares these words, the world around Him is in political turmoil, it has unpredictable natural disasters, and many would be feeling the anxiety of "what is to come?" Many would recognize this apocalyptic prophesy as a reflection of what was already happening in the current time.

I know we can recognize these signs as well. We have experienced a devastating pandemic and anxiety about what is and what is to come can feel overwhelming especially with news of a new variant.

Jesus reminds us that God's time is more complicated. God exists both in the here and in the not yet. God comforts us and is always near, no matter the situation in the world. While it feels that now is an unprecedented time, and indeed in some ways it is, we still can be comforted that God's promise has always come in times of turbulence and fear. The fear of end times has been around for 2000 years but what remains is God's promise and love for creation.

We are reminded that love permeates into our lives from God and we can reflect this love to all that we encounter. Even amongst the difficulty and the pain that pervades, the seconds in our lives don't just count when we're maximizing potential or getting paid, they count because we are blessed to be a part of creation and loved so much by God. We are reminded that no matter our situation, God is near and God's kingdom gives us hope both now and for the future yet untold.

This reminds us of the gift each one of our lives can be. We can appreciate where we are in this moment and still hold hope for a future that feels deeply, God's love and abundant grace. It situates how we live with one another now as an important part of how we live our lives together in the future.

Paul, in our second lesson, is writing to the church in Thessalonica. Before our reading begins Paul explains that he wanted to go to help them establish their church and encourage them in their faith but he could not at the time. Instead, he sent his trusted friend Timothy to help them. The church in Thessalonica is facing many challenges and tribulations as well. They live in a time that there is hostility

to the budding Christian church and the counterculture teachings that Christians live by.

When Timothy comes back to Paul, he is overjoyed with what he has learned. Despite, there being stumbling blocks and barriers in the way, the church in Thessalonica is strong and enduring. Paul continues to share how encouraged he is by the Thessalonians and all that they are doing in God's name. "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?" Paul writes.

Paul is so filled with joy by his siblings in Christ, that they are moving forward and that love is abounding in their space. In a time where we think often about outcomes, let us remember first the amazing love that exists in this place. All of our lives have taken many paths and we have certainly all faced sorrows and held many joys.

We too, can be encouraged and know that our faith is not done on our own. Our faith is together, a community of Christians who face many challenges in life but are bound together by God and all the joy that bubbles from the fount of living water.

So, as we continue to wait for what is to come, for the promise of God to be fulfilled and the kingdom of God to be here on Earth we remember all the love and joy that is so important right now. That God resides here in this place and this community

is one of encouragement and love. No longer do we have to weigh the math on if each second is achieving what it is that we hope to achieve.

Instead, we can be filled in this community of love and remember that God's grace has been enough, is enough now, and will continue to be enough for us. We can delight in the coming and waiting for Christ Jesus and celebrate with overwhelming joy the sacrifice Christ made for us. We can continue to spread encouragement and joy in anticipation of all that is to come and a reminder that in this moment and always, God is near.

Dear God, we thank you for being so present in our lives and the gift of life that you give. Remind us that love and joy exists in each moment, even as we face challenges or simply are stuck in the seemingly mundane tasks of life. Enfold us in your love that is so near and prepare our hearts for your return first as a child born in a manger and again, as we continue to wait for the kingdom of God on Earth. Go with us in all that is to come and let us give thanks for the joy and abundance that you bring. Amen.