

Nothing is ever lost in the kingdom of God

I have now seen at least three articles in different places suggesting that, emerging from the pandemic, the world will experience another Roaring '20s as we try rather manically to make up for lost time.

I wonder if we might pause to think about the idea of missing out, of lost time, of the unlived life we have all had to watch from the sidelines over the past year. Perhaps we might tie these reflections to the unlived life as we find ourselves in another Lent during COVID time..



A health care worker, masked for protection from COVID-19, cares for a homeless man at the Pope Francis Center in Detroit in May 2020. CNS photo/Jim West

The Gospels say a lot about lost time by saying nothing at all. We go rapidly from Jesus the newborn to Jesus being baptized as an adult, traditionally around the age of 30. And then in a few weeks, we have raced through his life to his Passion and Death.

From one perspective, then, most of Jesus' life seems lost. We know virtually nothing of the first three decades, and after a scant three years of public ministry, he declares, from high atop the cross, "[*consummatum est*](#)," and dies. Surely by any measure of earthly success, such a life must be counted a loss and a tragedy, as he is far too young to die.

We might assume that [his resurrection](#) would give him a chance to make up for the lost time and missed opportunities. After all, he had his most productive years ahead of him! Now he could settle down to establish the kingdom of God by force: *Christus vincit! Christus regnat! Christus imperat!*

But having been given the greatest second chance of all, what does he do? After a mere 40 days, he returns to heaven. Jesus is completely uninterested in making up for apparently lost time. For he knows that nothing is ever truly lost in the kingdom of God.

That is a good lesson for us as we begin moving out of this pandemic. But it is a hard thing for us to grasp – to shun fantasies about lost time and desires to make up for it. Why might we want to reign our fantasies in?

Unrealistic wanting

Here I am helped by another Jewish teacher and healer, Adam Phillips, a British psychotherapist. In his 2012 book "[Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life](#)" (Picador, \$16.99), Phillips begins on a note entirely consonant with the best of Christian wisdom when he flatly insists that "reality matters because it is the only thing that can satisfy us." Phillips counsels against spending time imagining what could have been – what sort of life we could have had but didn't – and not just because of a pandemic, but also because of the thousand other deprivations that flesh is heir to.

In this regard, Phillips reminds me of the counsel against the

logismoi (“disordered thoughts,” which in the West eventually come to be called the seven deadly sins). We find in the great monastic Evagrius Ponticus, who long before the advent of modern psychology, was counseling Christians not to indulge in fantasies of vainglory and idle speculation about what might have been.

What if, instead, we bear our frustrations for a while, sit with them? That is a hard discipline to do (“frustration may be the thing that we are least able to let ourselves feel,” Phillips says) because we all want to fix our frustrations – or have others, like popes and presidents, fix them for us. Often, however, our imagined solutions are wildly improbable and only lead to further frustration for, as Phillips puts it, “there can only be unrealistic wanting.”

Was Jesus frustrated and prone to unrealistic wanting on the cross, fantasizing about all the things he might have been doing that dark and dolorous Friday afternoon we strangely call good? St. Paul suggests not (cf. Phil 2:5-11). If the omnipotent and omniscient Christ-God could kenotically forego it all, might we also think about letting go of our desires, frustrations and fantasies?

Limits to understanding

Later in his book, Phillips makes what we could call his “apophatic” turn – that is, his turn to not knowing or, as he frequently puts it, to not “getting it,” to let go of the desire, one might say, to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He reminds us – as another Jewish writer, the author of Genesis did – that “omniscience ... is the enemy, the saboteur, of satisfaction.”

Instead of always trying to know everything, we should ask ourselves this question instead: “In which area of our lives does not knowing, not getting it, give us more life rather than more deadness?” To ask such a question, Phillips says, is

to remind us of our need to acquire an “understanding to the limits of understanding.”

The limits to understanding are the places where, for many Christians, mystery or faith begin. For centuries, Christian writers have written of a “cloud of unknowing,” of the “dark night of the soul” in which we see and understand not, but must proceed on trust. Perhaps this is best encapsulated by St. John Henry Newman’s famous hymn: “Lead, kindly Light, amidst th’ encircling gloom; / Lead Thou me on! / The night is dark, and I am far from home; / Lead Thou me on! / KeepThou my feet; I do not ask to see/ The distant scene – one step enough for me.”

“One step enough for me” is very close to “One day at a time,” which so many addictions programs counsel people to practice – and which we might be telling ourselves now, too, if we made new year’s resolutions.

Great psychologists and spiritual guides alike know that when trying to overcome bad habits or disordered desires, including our desires for omniscience and omnipotence, we must proceed slowly, and cannot replace something with nothing. If you want to give up smoking, you might have to take up knitting or woodworking to have something to do with your hands.

Opportunities to love and serve

Similarly, if we want to give up our frustrations and our fantasies about lost time and all the pleasures forbidden to us by the pandemic, we need instead to focus on what Phillips, in a more recent book, titled “[Unforbidden Pleasures](#)” (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$10.99). As he puts it, “unforbidden pleasures have something more to tell us, or at least something else to tell us, about pleasure than the forbidden ones. Were this to be true, a lot of things that we have taken very seriously would seem less serious. The tyranny of the forbidden is not that it forbids, but that it tells us what we

want – to do the forbidden thing. The unforbidden gives no orders.”

Translating this again into theological terminology, the unforbidden, which gives no orders, is what Christians call love. We are never forbidden to love and to serve. The Christian needs no permission from anyone to do those things.

And our time in this pandemic has presented us with even more opportunities to love and serve people who are suffering in so many ways. The one key lesson I have learned this year is that serving someone else is a great cure for (or at least considerable relief from) your own melancholy and anxiety. To serve soup in a homeless shelter, or shovel your elderly neighbor’s snow – or anything simple and similar like this – lifts your spirits and frees you from the tyranny of self-pitying fantasies about what you are missing out on. More than that a psychological salve, humble service is also the work of our salvation.

As 2021 and the pandemic unfold, let us remain awhile in our humble and quiet stations serving our suffering brothers and sisters and so serving the Lord in whose eternal kingdom nothing good will ever be lost.

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