

The quirky 1999 comic film *Office Space* tells the story of a young, cubicle-dwelling computer software engineer named Peter Gibbons. His miserable commute to a soul-crushing job with tiresome co-workers and an inane boss has led him to a passive depression so profound that he is essentially helpless and infantile. His hectoring, hyper-critical girlfriend, disgusted by his apathy, compels him to see an occupational hypnotherapist, someone who promises to program Peter's mental and emotional outlook to be more content with the state of his life through the power of hypnosis. At the exact moment that he has lulled Peter into the deepest possible state of total relaxation, the occupational hypnotherapist suffers a massive heart-attack and dies. Still intoxicated by his hypnotic relaxation, Peter wanders blissfully out of the office and returns to his normal life. The things that used to quietly infuriate him are now completely unimportant. He tears down the idiotic motivational posters that paper his office walls, he unscrews and throws down the cubicle walls that had blocked a window view of the outside world, and he completely ignores his bullying boss. Shockingly, the higher-ups at Peter's work see his Zen-like attitude as a sign of leadership; they promote him again and again even while his stressed, hard-working co-workers are laid off. Eventually, Peter's hypnosis wears off, but his changed attitude remains. He shares an epiphany about their cubicle-centered culture and its fatal influence on their freedom with Michael, a friend and recently laid-off colleague: "Michael, we don't have a lot of time on this earth! We weren't meant to spend it this way." Peter's life is changed; he rejects his former slavery and he encourages others to do the same.

Peter is right. We don't have a lot of time on this earth. We weren't meant to spend it the way our culture expects us to. Recently, a parishioner loaned me her copy of a book that's been making the rounds: John Mark Comer's *The Ruthless Elimination*

*of Hurry*. Comer, a New York Times bestselling author of four other books, burned himself out for twenty years as a pastor of a nondenominational Evangelical church in Portland, Oregon before he realized the time he was spending as a frenetic church-builder would be better spent—personally and for his flock—cultivating classic, broadly Christian spiritual practices like prayer, silence, fasting, and other elements of what St. Benedict in the 6<sup>th</sup> century called a Rule of Life. I’m still working my way through *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (I’m trying not to hurry), but I was arrested by Comer’s observations about how our contemporary experience of time is drastically different from what it was only about a century and a half ago. In 1879, Thomas Edison invented the light bulb. Electric light enhanced industrial productivity because workers could continue their work after dark (or even bring in second and third shifts) in a way that the more expensive and more dangerous gas or oil-fueled lamps did not. To us in our sleep-deprived age, Comer presents evidence of how socially seismic that change was: before Thomas Edison, the average person slept eleven hours each night. We average, at best, seven. And that does not factor the radical disruption of twice-a-year Daylight Saving adjustments. Comer argues that our experience of time is unnatural. In rural, agrarian cultures—like Maury County before the 20<sup>th</sup> century—there was a rhythm to time: the summer days were long and busy and the winter days were short and slow. In general, in harmony with the rotation of the earth on its axis and the four seasons, people went to bed with the moon and got up with the sun. But the endless Industrial and technological revolutions that continue to redefine time for the sake of productivity not only break our relationship with the natural order but redefine human value. Because we *can* now work harder for longer, there is an imperative that we *should*, or even *must*. Our personal identity and value are now synonymous with and equal to our commercial

usefulness, either as producers or consumers. Inevitably this alters our understanding of money, which represents the time and energy we spend to earn it. It is any wonder that so many of us, whether hourly wage-earners or salaried service-providers, who were already exhausted from unnatural, un-circadian rhythms, should find ourselves completely strung out about not having enough time to earn enough money to get what we need? At this time in our culture, if we run out of money, we are not only broke—we are broken. But the fact is that we do not have a lot of time on this earth. We were not meant to spend it this way.

All of which leads us to today's Gospel reading. It is the week before Passover in Jerusalem—a week before Jesus will be crucified. He does not have much time left on this earth. Jesus sits down to watch people drop their monetary Passover gifts into the treasury at the Temple. The Temple in Jerusalem was a series of increasingly exclusive, ever-narrowing rectangular courts with ornate gates. At the center was the smallest space of all: the Holy of Holies where the Presence of God dwelled. The events in today's Gospel take place in the Court of the Women, which was two courts outward. It was also called the Treasury because it was surrounded by thirteen collection chests: Two chests received the annual Temple Tax all adult Hebrews were expected to pay for the Temple's upkeep and ministry of worship. Ten chests received payments that covered the material cost for animal sacrifices: the animals, incense, and wood. The last chest received gifts that were voluntary and undesignated: those gifts covered any need of any part of the Temple's economy without any benefit to the donor.

In today's Gospel, this last chest is what captures Jesus' attention. Mark says that many rich people put large sums into it. From their abundance they are making unrestricted plate offerings to the Temple's operating budget. Jesus does not

condemn these donors. Then He sees a poor widow make her gift to that chest. The Greek word we translate as poor is *pto-khos*—it means “to bend over” and “to crouch” like a beggar. Further, the word we translate as widow is *chera*: it means “bereft.” In his book of the Revelation, St. John uses the same word—*chera*—to describe a city conquered, plundered, and stripped of its people and its riches (18:7). The poor widow is completely destitute; she has lost everything. But even though she is completely knocked-down, bent-over, and empty in every way in which define value in life, she still makes a freewill offering to God with no expectation of return. She gives everything she has—two *kodrantēs*: two copper coins about \$0.77. Even though the world would see this gift as something meager and even pathetic, Jesus immediately calls His disciples together and tells them that the widow had contributed more than everyone who had given that day, combined.

Why does Jesus praise her as He does?

He is not, as we might first imagine, giving His disciple—or us—a prescription for how we ought to imitate her. For some reason, we are always tempted to read ourselves into the center of the Gospel. But the Gospel is not about us—it’s about Jesus. He is not telling us what we need to do; He is giving us a description of what He Himself has come to do. In that poor widow, Jesus sees something of Himself. In just one week, on Passover, the Incarnation of the King of Kings and Lord of Lord, God the only-begotten Son of God, will empty Himself of all that He has and all that He is on the Cross for us without any expectation of anything we might do for Him in return. Already, at His Incarnation and birth in Bethlehem, He bereft Himself of His omniscience and His omnipotence and became just one of the over one-hundred-billion ordinary people across our planet in the course of history. Born in a barn and raised unremarkably, in one week He will be crucified in

obscurity. Yet like the widow who gives everything she possesses—no matter how little and apparently inconsequential to the world—to the Presence of God in the earthly Temple, Jesus on the Cross gives everything He possesses to bring us to His Presence which is Heaven. The bereft widow makes an unrestricted sacrifice to God; in Christ, God sacrifices Himself to offer unrestricted forgiveness, total healing, and final resurrection to all who simply believe, trust, and follow Him.

The point is this: The Gospel is never about what we need to do to earn God's love; the Gospel is always about what God has done to share His love with us. We are not saved by what we hold. We are not saved by what we give. In the end, we are saved by God: He gave Himself for us and holds us forever. This means that time is not meant to be measured or stressed over; it is meant to be lived and shared. We can relax and simply enjoy our forgiveness. Relax and enjoy our belovedness. Relax and enjoy our being made children of God. Because in the end, we do not have a lot of time on this earth. In whatever time we have been given, in whatever time we have left, whether we give, do not give, or have nothing left to give, we always give thanks that in Christ, God has already given it all so that He might give us everything.