

Rearranging Deck Chairs

1 Peter 4:7-11

Rev. Jenaba Waggy

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“The most notable fact in religion today is that ministers of all denominations are trying, somewhat desperately but with immense energy and imagination, to find new ways to carry God back into the everyday life of society and to make him, in the prevailing cliché of the day, ‘relevant.’ This is not primarily a theological movement. Still, important new trends in theology suggest that God may best be met in the co-creation of a more humane society or, internally, in the deepest structures of our own psyches...As so often in the history of faith, this new effort to build a new ministry is a reaction against past failures...The young are not as irreligious as they seem—far from it. But most fail to recognize their religious impulse, and they satisfy it far away from the churches.”¹

I get at least five emails a week from various organizations toting books, webinars, coaching partnerships, and trainings that I as a pastor can take to encourage stronger giving, better church attendance, higher youth engagement, pastoral satisfaction, and quite probably how to best get out hard water stains. The quote I just read could very well be part of any one of the scripts, articles, and opinion editorials that make up that growing industry of telling pastors and lay leadership how we can save the Church from each new year of numerical decline, but it’s not. That quote is from an article entitled “The New Ministry: Bringing God Back to Life”. It was published in *Time Magazine* in December of 1969.

The article is a fascinating read all around, partly because there is still so much of it that remains applicable in the religious landscape (not all, definitely; there’s a lot of angst about what they’re teaching in Catholic seminaries that is decidedly not the same conversation 55 years later). But some of the article’s staying power comes from a different quote. “With gallows humor, a Catholic priest dismisses reforms like lay parish councils as ‘shuffling deck chairs on the Titanic.’”²

It’s the first printed instance of the phrase, now an idiom for occupying oneself with trivial actions while ignoring more important things. It’s something the Church hears a lot—that we are shuffling deck chairs, focusing on banal things while our organization sinks, while the world distrusts us more and more, while we become more and more distanced from our own “why.” It’s not a completely incorrect accusation, but it’s also an easy jab that doesn’t get into why someone would want to focus on chairs in the first place. I’ve seen the James Cameron film *Titanic*; I know that the scene when the ship starts sinking in earnest is one of terror, panic, and anger. I know also that in our 21st century world, it is an incredible temptation to make absolutely perfect rows of chairs if it means we don’t have to face the terror, panic, and anger that permeates our cultural narrative.

“The end of all things is near,” begins this section of Peter’s first letter. To those of us who have gotten used to the street preachers crying this in an effort to make passersby feel

¹ “The New Ministry: Bringing God Back to Life,” *Time Magazine*, December 26, 1969, [THE NEW MINISTRY: BRINGING GOD BACK TO LIFE - TIME](#).

² Ibid.

shamed, this may not seem like the best thing to put into a letter to the faithful, but the early Christians were excited about such a promise. Christ's second coming, the one that would truly free them from the casual cruelty of the Roman Empire, the one that would restore them to glory, was going to be a relatively quick thing—maybe not next Tuesday but surely by the end of the year.

Current scholarship puts the writing of 1 Peter somewhere around 90—some 60 years after Jesus' resurrection.³ The Second Coming hadn't been next Tuesday, or even the end of the year, and some of the faithful are starting to have doubts about whether or not Christianity is worth it when people like Peter—or, more likely, a student of Peter's writing in his name—keep saying the end is near. The second letter of Peter-slash-Peter's disciple tells us that some of the faithful are not doing well in the waiting, either abandoning the faith or becoming bitter and cynical.⁴

We don't recognize that response at all, either, I'm sure.

"The end of all things is near," Peter reassures his audience of "exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia".⁵ The hope is still alive, your exile is not permanent, God has not forgotten you—but in the waiting, the Church has to do something constructive. Rearranging deck chairs isn't helping anyone, and simply saying "everything will be fine" is laughable when everything is demonstrably not fine right now. Fear, anger, worry, and sorrow are not inventions of the 20th and 21st centuries, so Peter says "it will be okay" and then says "so here's who we are in the meantime."

"Therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another."

Our world is a mess. The UMC is a mess. FUMC is a mess. There isn't a place I know of that isn't a mess of some format right now, including my own desk, but we and the exiles to whom Peter writes are called not to get stuck in the mess. In this act of gathering together for worship we remind ourselves that the mess is never stronger than the community God has built and is building with and through and despite us. The *Time* article was right that we want to be relevant, but relevance isn't what saves us. It was right that having good programming is swell but programming isn't what saves us. It was right to say that rearranging deck chairs while the ship sinks is foolish because we are called to self-discipline, to prayer, and above all to constant love. Our purpose as the Church in the world is to love—to love until it hurts because it requires that we let go of our prejudices and assumptions, to love until it heals because we refuse to let anyone walk through the world forgotten and dismissed, to love until it covers the multitude of sins we commit against God and each other while we, too, wait for Jesus to make this make sense. Eugene Boring writes that, "First Peter is thus preeminently a message of hope, encouraging its readers to understand themselves as called to follow the example of Christ in the context of a hostile world".⁶

³ M. Eugene Boring, "1 and 2 Peter," in *The New Interpreter's Bible One Volume Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 900.

⁴ Wilke and Wilke, *Disciple: Becoming Disciples through Bible Study* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 234.

⁵ 1 Peter 1:1, NRSVue.

⁶ Boring, "1–2 Peter," 900.

But it is very difficult to love and I am very good at arranging chairs, so what next? One of my college roommates introduced me to the music of Harry Chapin, the folk rock activist who truly hit popularity in the 1970s. One of his songs that gets caught in my head occasionally is “Dance Band on the Titanic” about the eight-person band who kept playing as the ship went down. While the idiom about deck chairs is a metaphor, the dance band is true; they played to keep the other passengers calm while they were sorting out lifeboats and all eight went down with the ship. Only three of the bodies were ever recovered and many survivors have lauded their heroism and what a gift it was for them to share their music in the chaos and fear.⁷ The musicians had one thing to give, and they chose to give that when they realized that it was so incredibly needed.

“Maintain constant love for one another,” Peter writes, and goes on to clarify how that love looks. “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.”

Yes, we each are called to love, but *how* we love changes depending on what we have to offer. I am not good at spending time with little children; thank you to the folks who enjoy when I have the children’s time, but that is not my joy. I much prefer people old enough to understand sarcasm. So I do that when it’s needed but that’s not where I love, not fully. My friend who introduced me to Harry Chapin is terrible at chatting with new people but marvelous when explaining how to see Bible stories as living tableaux, so she doesn’t do greeting and does do skits and story times and acting. She loves with her gifts, her signs of grace that she stewards, cares for, gives back to the world.

Bishop Kenneth Carter, Jr., currently serving the Western North Carolina Conference, wrote a book in the midst of the disaffiliations in the UMC called *Unrelenting Grace: A United Methodist Way of Life*. In it, he writes, “The next generation’s church will be about justice and mercy rooted in discipleship and spirituality as the redefined path to sanctification. It will be grounded in the core values of grace, connection, and holiness. This church will need leaders, teachers, missionaries, spiritual directors, pastors, lay leaders, trainers, servants, and builders. It will flourish as the people who remain—who will be most of us—ask and respond to the question, ‘What gift can I bring?’”⁸

We who are stewards of grace have been given so much and are asked to use the gifts that we have. So what gift do you bring, beautiful mess? How can you let go of your own deck chairs to love in the way that you can love, to bring grace to a world in desperate need of it? One possibility is our Service Sunday next week, the 14th. Instead of worship in the downtown sanctuary in the morning, we’re going to go out and use our gifts of body and time to help weed park gardens, sort clothing donations, clean new rooms for temporary housing, cook breakfasts, and a myriad of other things needed by organizations around Ann Arbor. There will be an email out on Monday for you to sign up to be part of a two-hour block of service, of grace, of love for this city in which we worship.

Maybe you have other gifts you’ve been wanting to explore, serving with the strength that God supplies. If you are great with kids, God bless you, I don’t get that, but talk to Rachel about

⁷ [Titanic Fact Check: Did The Band Really Play While The Ship Was Sinking? \(screenrant.com\)](https://www.screenrant.com/titanic-band-really-play-while-ship-was-sinking/)

⁸ Carter, *Unrelenting Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2023), 58.

it; she has plenty of ways to connect you. Music be the food of your love? Our new choral director Ken would be happy to meet you. If you, unlike my friend, are super excited about being a welcoming presence, come talk to me and I'll help you figure out how best to use that. Want to do more community connection through the year? Reach out to the Justice League—or me, if you're not sure how to do that—and ask about the ministry partnerships we have. Your gift, your joy is something only you can bring, so bring it wholeheartedly.

Today, we receive the gift and grace and love of communion. Carter writes, “We don't always love each other well. And our communion is with a God Whom we don't always love completely... We receive communion with the hope that our imperfect, even disordered loves will mature.”⁹ This is how we connect to each other, to the Church that was just beginning to realize that the end wasn't so much near as “sometime;” this is how we receive the reality that God is ever reaching to us with “manifold grace,” equipping us to go into the world and love like we have it to spare; this is how we play music rather than move deck chairs. At the table, we are reminded that we are Christ's Body in the world, that we are loved and able to love, and that the fear, the anger, the sorrow do not outweigh the invitation to come, eat, and be welcomed in by the One to Whom the glory and power belong, forever.

May it be so. Amen.

⁹ Carter, *Unrelenting Grace*, 24.