19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

A friend of mine in England has had kidney problems for 7-plus years. After a great deal of treatment, he has risen to the top of the list for a transplant. He is now on call. If an organ becomes available, he'll have two hours to get to the hospital. He's staying close to home and not engaging in any activities that require more than an hour's time. The world changes when you are on alert.

Jesus praises this kind of person in his parable today. Its good servant stands ever on alert to assist his master whenever he returns from the wedding. Perhaps the servant's livelihood was at stake if he fell asleep on the job. Jesus wants his disciples to exercise that kind of vigilance over his unexpected return to them—living every moment as if they had little time to get ready.

A similar urgency lies behind tonight's reading from the Book of Wisdom. It recounts the first Passover—Israel's flight from Egypt. People "awaited the salvation of the just and the destruction of their foes." When they learned that the night had come, they had courage because they had been on alert.

Tonight's responsorial contributes to this sense of urgency. We heard our cantor sing these verses from Psalm 33: "Our soul is waiting for the Lord. He is our help and our shield. May your merciful love be upon us, as we hope in you, O Lord."

In our culture, waiting feels like wasting time. We call a customer help line, and we're put on hold. We need to renew our license, and we stand in line. We go to a ballgame, but traffic blocks our way. Our time is more important than that. We shouldn't have to wait to accomplish our goals.

Yet, waiting can be productive. We can pass our time on alert, doing things that make us ready when the moment comes. When I was in college, I remember taking some classes that seemed totally irrelevant to my future, but I understood that school was preparing me for a variety of things that could come my way—both good and bad. By passing the time productively, I would be better prepared for whatever lay ahead.

Last week another friend recovering from surgery told me the doctors said one reason he responded so well is the regimen of exercise he put himself through every day. His body was fit for an unexpected future. Exercise doesn't waste time. It keeps our bodies on alert.

Like the people in these readings, we are all waiting on some word from the Lord. We may face a moment of great opportunity or tremendous loss. We want to be ready for whatever comes. Like someone awaiting a transplant, we stay close to the one who may call us, and far from distractions.

Often we do not wait well. We indulge in pleasantries that pass time in the present, but do not get us ready for the future. A good spiritual life spends time in prayer, study, and works of mercy. It tends the body and the soul. If we find ourselves squandering opportunities to do something more productive with our time, we may not be the servants Jesus praises. As in the psalm, we best pursue activities that show "Our soul waits for the Lord." Waiting has its anxieties, but it also has its opportunities—if we put ourselves ever on alert.