

Making the Most of the Time

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Dale L. Bishop

Text: Ephesians 5:15-20

This morning's passage from Ephesians instructs us about wisdom and time, specifically it tells us how we should be wise in the way we use our time. And the beautiful passage we heard from Proverbs is a kind of hymn to wisdom. Wisdom is a worthy subject for our consideration, but this morning I'd like to reflect with you about time, time as it was understood by the early church, time as it was understood by Paul and the apostles. And, of course, in doing that, we'll need to think about how we ourselves understand, and use, time.

We know that time is a given, a part of our understanding of reality. Time is marked out, not only by the rotating hands of a clock or by the flipping of pages on a calendar, but we also notice the passage of time in the rising and the setting of the sun, or by the angle of sunlight as it strikes the earth. Even without checking our calendars, we have begun almost unconsciously to notice the shortening of the days. No matter how warm our August days have been, we know, we can just feel, that autumn is just around the corner. Our ospreys have left their nest on Sundstein Road and headed south, and our hummingbirds are sugar-loading in preparation for their impending long migration; the bracken has begun to turn brown. All these things are reminders of the reality of time, and of its passing.

But if we recognize time as a given, too often we fail to recognize it as a gift. When I talk about time as a gift, I'm not talking about what we sometimes refer to as "stolen time," the time that becomes suddenly available to us, like an unexpected present: perhaps in the cancellation of a meeting, or on a snow day, or that extra day off around a holiday. Such "stolen" times are a gift, to be sure, but the real gift is time itself. And part of that gift is

limitation that is inherent in time. Time is measured. We may not think of limitation as a gift, but isn't it the limit on something that makes it so precious? Mark Twain said that truth is so precious because it is so rare.

So part of what makes time precious is the fact that for each of us, time is limited. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. Imagine, for example, how long church meetings would last if there were no limits. Or, even worse, sermons. Or imagine a soccer game in which there is no referee keeping time, or an NFL season that goes on and on, with no Super Bowl.

Or, imagine our lives if there were no death. In our Christian faith, we talk about eternal life, but this is life beyond the grave, or, perhaps, some of us think of it as life that is here and now, and mystically partakes of immortality, life that is infused with the divine. But, for saints and sinners alike, for all of us, death is the ultimate limit on our this-worldly life. There is, of course, nothing more sad, nothing that seems more unfair, or more inexplicable, than the death of a child, or a youth, or someone seemingly at the prime of life. But death can also be a kind of joyful culmination, a completion of a rich, exciting and rewarding journey. My former pastor, William Sloane Coffin once described heaven as a place where God meets us at the celestial airport, picks up our bags, asks us how the trip was, and really wants to see all our pictures. For many people we have known, death, that ultimate limitation, has come as a welcome visitor, wrapping her arms around one who is weary of the journey, of its pain and suffering, one who longs for release. "Come, Sweet Death," as the Bach cantata puts it.

So, although we experience eternity in our lives and beyond our lives, time as we understand it has a beginning and an end. It is linear, not cyclical. At least that is the understanding of time that we have inherited in our Judeo-Christian tradition. We believe in history; we believe that God works in history, in real time, and that there is a beginning and a goal for creation.

For Paul, and for the early church, history was about to end and time was going to be no more. The signs were everywhere. As he puts it, “the times are evil,” which was one of the sure indications that this earthly realm was about to come to an end, and the timeless kingdom of heaven about to begin. Jesus was about to return. The situation was urgent; the implications were cosmic. “Make the most of the time,” Paul told the church in Ephesus. And even though we may not share his apocalyptic views, his advice still has relevance for us.

The early church was actually fixated on the Second Coming, an event that was anticipated then, and has been anticipated at various times ever since. In our day there are those who believe that they can predict the Second Coming by correctly interpreting the book of Revelation. They read that book as a kind of horoscope, or cosmic almanac. But for the early church there was no need of such speculation. The early church was a collection of small and disciplined communities of people who lived as if the end time was already here. And the members of that church developed an ethic that fit that expectation. People in the early church divided their resources equally among members of the church, for example, with the understanding that an investment in the future didn't make sense if there was to be no future. Why accumulate things if there was no future when those things might be useful? But as time went on, and that Second Coming didn't happen, the church was gradually transformed from a small and expectant community to a settled institution, with a hierarchy and structure, and a set of creeds that were to last for centuries. They began to develop church budgets. The Second Coming was put off into the distant and unknowable future. What came to matter most was the institution of the church--its faithfulness and its survival.

The urgency gradually ebbed, and finally it almost disappeared.

I want to suggest this morning that even though we don't share the early church's fearful and hopeful anticipation of the end, or Christ's second coming, there is yet a powerful lesson to be learned from that church's sense of urgency. If we don't invest our sense of time with a sense that these times, these very times, are important, crucial even, then we

run the risk of simply going through the motions with our faith. The church should live as if there are no tomorrows, as if we are about to be judged. Now.

That's true for the church, and it's true for us as individuals. How many of us do go through the motions, stuck in jobs or in roles in life that amount simply to marking time. Or, even worse, killing time? How many of us behave as if we were immortal, endlessly putting off real life until we get around to it? How many of us know people who reach the end of their lives and look back at those lives not with regrets for the things they did, but with regrets for the things they didn't do? That's the danger of regarding time as a given, but not as a gift, a precious gift that carries its own sense of limitation.

I remember when I was living in Cleveland, working in the national offices of the United Church of Christ. I was one of the five officers of the church, and head of our church's agency for overseas ministries. And I was spending a lot of time behind a desk, or dealing with personnel issues. I found myself waking up at 3 in the morning hashing over the problems of the day ahead; getting up early to get my exercise on a stationary bicycle in a health club, which somehow seemed appropriate for that stage of my life—a lot of movement, but going nowhere—and then returning to my apartment, where I would begin to fret about those things that would later awaken me in the middle of the night.

One early morning, as I was driving in the winter darkness to my pathetic health club in downtown Cleveland, I thought to myself, "I have only so much time to enjoy this world, and I'm not enjoying it now." I knew that I was not, in the words of Ephesians, making the most of the time. That morning revelation began a process that led me to move to the Northwoods. At times, after I made the move up here, I thought I was too happy, that I was being selfish. Life here seemed almost too rich, too full. There were those morning walks with the dog when I would watch the sun rise over the stark winter beauty of the woods that surround us; or when I would marvel over the rich greens of our prodigal summers; when I would be moved by the simplicity and beauty of worshipping in a small church. It almost made me feel guilty to be savoring life so much.

And I have learned here that there is no hierarchy in faithfulness; no pecking order in one's sense of ministry: I learned that trying to live faithfully in a small Northwoods community is every bit as challenging, and every bit as satisfying, as occupying an office in denominational headquarters, and carrying an impressive title could ever be. Actually more. And I never imagined that I would be given the privilege and joy of being a pastor.

“Take hold of the life that is really life,” says Paul in I Timothy. “Make use of the time,” says Paul in Ephesians.

Here is what I hope will happen during our interim time together: it is that we will make use of this time that has been given to us as a gift by God, to make ourselves ready for an unknown, unknowable and exciting future.

And are we, as individuals, ready to make use of the time that is given to us, to discover life, real life? Are we ready to put away those things that distract, that deaden our souls, that lull us into a lifeless complacency that kills time rather than savoring it? Don't get drunk with that which anesthetizes your souls, says Paul. But sing spiritual songs; make a melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks for everything in the name of Jesus Christ, the one who gives us life. Real life.

Amen.