

August 19
Whitsuntide Thirteen
Ephesians 5: 15 - 20

About this time of the year I always remember the cartoon strip Nancy. To be more accurate, just one Sunday's cartoon. In each of the frames that day, Nancy and her boyfriend Sluggo are running from one piece of playground equipment to the next, leaving him exhausted. He asks why she is going from the swings to the slides to the teeter-totter and then the merry-go-round. In exhaustion, the two collapse on the grass to look up at the clouds, and Sluggo wants to know what is going on. Nancy explains that school starts tomorrow and I want to do all of the things I planned to do all summer.

That is a message that transcends all age groups. Children read the cartoon and thought - I'd better to out and play before classes start. I have not yet done half the things I wanted to do this summer. Adults are enticed into thinking about the priorities in their life - what is truly important, and the things in their life that get in the way that need to be purged.

There are a number of different ways of looking at this morning's epistle passage, interpreting it, and perhaps putting it into practice in our life. And, as with so many other passages about Christian life, our interpretation may change as we age or because of circumstances. Many evangelical Christians might look at this passage and say that Jesus will soon be returning; we need to go out and convert people, get them baptized, and get them involved in our church. That is certainly an ancient and traditional interpretation and course of action.

Others will look at it from a more personal perspective. Still others will explore what it means to live the abundant life.

We might see it as a call to social action. We can't wait for the government or any other organization to help meet the needs of people. While others talk and get organized, we could be out there putting Christ's instructions to care for others, especially the needy, and get on with it. Sometimes that is the right thing to do; other times, our heart races far too far ahead of our brain.

Discerning what to do and when to do it is important whenever we seek to do God's will.

But we also must be just as vigilant about not rushing too fast into action.

One of our stops last week was in Ketchikan, and we went to the Saxman Indian village to see the totem poles, some of which were very recent; others quite ancient. More important than merely looking at these poles is understanding the story behind them.

When Russia claimed Alaska in the late 1700s, the Russian Orthodox clergy came and established a diocese and churches. Immediately, they encountered these poles and asked the local tribes about them. They explained that some were mortuary poles where they buried their dead; others were clan or family poles, and some were story boards. The elders would take a group to the story board poles and use the symbol as a basis for the spiritual lesson of the day.

The clergy thought it over and realized it was hardly any different from their own icons, and quickly realized that the poles were far from being pagan idols or shrines. If anything, the Russians encouraged the people to continue their

tradition. Meanwhile, they translated their languages into written form, and taught the children how to read and write in their native languages, primarily so they could read the worship liturgies.

Then, in 1867, America bought Russia and the evangelical missionaries flooded in. They took one look at the totem poles, asked no questions, and declared they were evil and had to go. They also set up schools and forbid the children to wear their traditional clothing, and insisted they speak English.

By the end of the 1800s, most of the Russian clergy had left, and they had trained and ordained the local men to take over their orthodox churches. The evangelical missionaries refused to relinquish control. The end result was that the natives flooded into the Orthodox churches, and they continue to flourish. The missionaries never really made much progress on their goal to convert and westernize the people.

We face two challenges. The first is to realize that we believe in our beliefs. If you believe something, regardless of what others may believe, you believe it, and believe it is right. We are also passionate about our passions. If yours happens to be model trains, much of your life will revolve around that hobby.

That can be a very good thing, but only if we keep in mind that it will have either a positive or very negative outcome on your life and the lives of everyone around you. In other words, if I believe this and am passionate about something, what is the probable result - and is it what I truly want for others and for myself?

That is what we learned in Ketchikan, and perhaps it is something we need always to keep in mind here as our parish moves forward. Individually, as a family, as a church family, with prayer and discernment, we have to think it through.

The second is the lesson from that cartoon strip. In the days leading up to the last day of school before the long summer holiday, I am sure Nancy had all sorts of dreams and ambitions for what she wanted to do. But it is obvious that she delayed until the last minute, and then tried to cram everything else. Well, for children, even in cartoon strips, learning when to have fun is part of growing up and making wise decisions.

Adults like to speak of a bucket list. It's the list of all the things we want to do, places we want to go, people we want to meet, skills we want to learn, experiences we want to have, and so on. Whether it is written on a piece of paper or rattling round in our minds, it's a list of things we want to experience before we kick the bucket, pass away, or as I call it - falling off my perch. We are far better than making a list than we are checking off the items.

We can come up with all sorts of good reasons why delay, debate the topic in our head, dither, and postpone. We have work that needs to be done. We should save our money for retirement. We should give more to the church or some other charity. Others might not approve. It's risky to make a sudden change. And what happens, we miss out on opportunities.

We all have those decisions to make in our life, and to not make a decision is to decide.

If you think the spiritual side of this is a bit thin, I encourage you to keep thinking. This is spiritual because all areas of life have a strong spiritual aspect to it. God gave you life, and His intention was for you to find true joy and experience it fully. On a very personal level that is one way we honour God. It is our way of staying 'thank you' for

what He has given us in our heart, mind, and body. It is utilizing the God-given gift of creativity and experiencing His world in new and sometimes very wonderful ways. In turn, we receive new insight about what God has placed before us, and what He is doing today.

Sometimes, as a result of living life to the fullest we find ourselves so greatly changed and transformed that we have a far greater influence on others than we ever imagined. For example, all of the members of our parish family who went on a short term domestic or foreign mission trip came home with far more to share with the rest of us than they ever imagined possible. A recurring theme is that they received far more than they gave.

We don't need someone to instruct us how to organize our life. We don't need the chorus of voices telling us, "You need to..." what ever the subject might be. This is personal stewardship - the use of the time and opportunities that God give to us. There is no right or wrong way - so long as we honestly believe in our heart and mind that we are honouring God.