

Ephesians 5: 15-20 “Pay Attention!” Rev. Janet Chapman 8/18/24

Over my years in ministry, I have taken a lot of seminars on leadership and read books on church management. They have a lot to say about making the most of our time, about not wasting of time, limiting meeting times with a tight agenda, balancing face time, phone time, and desk time, delegating and improving efficiency, maintaining and checking off lists (my preferred practice)... and especially the avoidance of distractions. One of my favorite stories of the dangers of distractions comes out of the movie Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves starring Kevin Costner. As Robin, Costner takes under his wing a young man learning to shoot a bow and arrow. Robin asks him, “Can you keep your aim amidst distractions?” Just before the boy releases the string, Robin pokes his ear with the feathers of an arrow and the boy’s shot flies high of the target by several feet. After the laughter dies down, Maid Marian, standing behind the boy asks Robin, “Can you?” Robin raises his bow and takes aim dead center of the target. Just as he releases, Marian leans beside him and blows into his face flirtatiously. The arrow misses the target, glances off the tree behind it, and scarcely misses a bystander.

Keeping focused, being wise and staying on target so as not to miss God’s mark, is at the heart of the letter to the Ephesians. For us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the words are a cautionary note of the dangers of being foolish in times such as ours, of taking our focus off our priorities. I once asked Ivy how she manages to handle so many dishes of food when she is working as a waitress and not stumble and fall. She replied, “I look where I’m going and not at the food.” Well, that makes sense. Our eyes stay focused on the goal thus we don’t miss the mark. In a time where technology has exceeded our wildest dreams, we are easily distracted by so many things which pull our focus away. We fall into the trap of believing we are involved in authentic and complete connections through technology. We lose the ability to engage with others face-to-face while being convinced we still have the ability to self-reflect on our lives despite holding tight to an artificial device. Thus, we are unacquainted with both ourselves and the world around us. Screens have replaced faces as we not only desert ourselves but those around us. We spend hours captivated by social media while our imagination lies useless. We have forgotten the sacred art of just being

still and quiet, the pleasures of being in nature, and the growth that happens in solitude – we have forgotten our very selves. John Naisbett says we are drowning in information but starving for knowledge... I would add that we are starving for wisdom. We live in a time where wisdom is scarce and foolishness is rampant.

In ancient wisdom literature such as Proverbs and Psalms, we see that wisdom is far more than just leadership skills or corporate management. Wisdom is grounded in our attentiveness to God's creativity which is seen in creation and God's workings in our body, mind, and spirit. Wisdom that originates from God takes us from self-interest to a loyalty to heaven being realized here on earth. The opposite of wisdom which is foolishness, therefore, is far more tragic than just wasting time. It is a disease of the intellect as much as of the will. The fool says in her heart that there is no God; or that she will live as god, which is perhaps the same thing. The fool thinks he needs bigger barns for the riches that he in his cleverness has accumulated. The fool conveniently forgets that the night his construction project is to be finished, that project he has literally thrown heart and soul into, could be the same night he succumbs to a massive heart attack.

The pace of our lives is accelerating in every aspect. Therefore, just as nature has seasons of rest, we need to build seasons of pause, rest and renewal into our rhythms, individually and as communities. Our digital technology may function at the speed of light, but our human bodies and communities can only function at the speed of life. So be careful how you live, the author of our text urges, which can also be translated "pay attention to how you are living!" Philosopher and activist Bayo Akomolafe says, "The times are urgent. We must slow down... we must slow down!" When our author says, "the days are evil," I take this not as much as a statement predicting the end times, something Jesus says again and again we will never know, but as a warning that the living of our lives can become evil if we don't redeem our days, if we don't save the times we are in. Take note, pay attention to the ways we strangle the very life out of our days, how we drain the energy from our times. We have enslaved the time we have on this earth through the chains of racism, sexism, nationalism, violence and such, which don't promote life but kill it. I've always cringed at the phrase, "I'm just killin' time," because time is a gift which when it runs

out, so do we. Resistance to change, callousness, lack of compassion and love, selfishness, pointless work, and laboriousness all can turn our time into days of evil, days which lack wisdom while practicing foolishness. We redeem the time by filling it with things that give life to us and the people around us. Yes, sometimes that can involve being efficient or using delegation but more often than not, it involves an efficiency of the spirit which is a long way from checking off lists. Kathleen Norris, in her book The Cloister Walk, sheds wisdom on making the most of our time as she shares that her perspective on time has changed over the years. “In our culture, time seems like an enemy: It chews us up and spits us out with appalling ease. But the monastic perspective welcomes time as a gift from God, and seeks to put it to good use, rather than allowing us to be used up by it. It is essentially poetic time, oriented toward process rather than productivity, willing to wait attentively in stillness rather than pushing to get the job done.”

This perspective brings us to the author’s encouragement to sing together and to one another. Many would say the act of singing has no lucrative or profitable rewards to it unless you are someone like Taylor Swift. But even recent terrorist threats in Vienna have proven that the best of singing can be turned into violence and a source of fear, the epitome of evil. I know we have some Swifties in our congregation, my youngest among them, having seen her in concert a decade ago. But I confess my heart rests with some of the oldies like Neil Diamond, the Beatles, and Simon & Garfunkel. My sister and I had the great joy last May of attending the Broadway musical based on Neil Diamond’s life called “A Beautiful Noise.” Being in that small theatre with a few hundred other Diamond devotees, I wandered if the Ephesians author had really tapped into something when he wrote “speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts.” All in the theatre were on our feet when the lead actor, former American Idol winner Nick Fradani, belted out “Song Sung Blue.” Some of you may be able to close your eyes now and hear the lyrics... Song sung blue, everybody knows one. Song sung blue, every garden grows one. Me and you are subject to the blues now and then, But when you take the blues and make a song... You sing ‘em out again You sing ‘em out again.” At the end of the musical, it concludes with the whole audience singing along with the cast

“Sweet Caroline.” It was truly surprising to experience such a sacred moment as suddenly we all became a part of Neil Diamond’s life story, but more than that, we were all bonded together, strangers alike, in the song. Isn’t that how music is sometimes? Someone else’s story which has been put to music becomes our story. Singing side by side someone else, even when you can’t even sing like myself, becomes a favorite memory. Recent studies of people suffering memory loss shows that even if they have forgotten everything else, many still remember favorite songs and music. When researchers played “Amazing Grace” to elderly patients, its words and tune as well as other songs they learned as children were among the very last memories they carried to their death. Music shaped the journey of their lives. In the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, St. Augustine said that singing and love were intimately connected. When we sing, our words of praise actually transform into love; songs open our souls to their deepest affections. I’ve been known to do some singing on my own when I’m out for a walk, where no one can hear me I hope, except for the dogs. I’m still able to watch the ground for rocks, limbs, and anything I might stumble over, but while my eyes are paying attention to the ground, my soul is paying attention to the music and neither is distracted. One theologian once said, “We sing our lives,” and if St. Augustine is right, we also sing our loves.

So take with you on your walk through life these words of our text today, to live your life wisely not foolishly; pay attention to your surroundings and the times in which we live; avoid distractions and never miss the opportunity to sing to the Lord in your hearts that love will always prevail. With this, we come to understand the Lord’s will for our lives and make the most of our time we have been given. Amen.