

Ephesians 5:15-20

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, **16** making the most of the time, because the days are evil. **17** So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. **18** Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, **19** as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, **20** giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Most of the Time

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Ephesians 5:15-20

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“Everything changed the day he figured out there was exactly enough time for the important things in his life.” – Anonymous

One 4th of July, I found myself wandering around the playground in a small town which is known for its old-fashioned Independence Day celebration. As I stood in line waiting for a hot dog and soda, I overheard a brief conversation between two friends.

One man walked up to another who was standing in the food line with his children, slapped his friend on the back — obviously happy to see him — and said with a summer's day enthusiasm, "Hey! It's great to see you. Are you having a good time?" The friend standing in line with his children replied — and this still haunts me years later — "Well, I'm losing money by being here, but I guess I'm having a good time."

I feel sorry for a guy like that. There we were at an exciting community event, kids were all over the place playing games and eating junk food. There was laughter and noise and crowds, pony rides and cotton candy and ice cream, baby parades and bike decorating contests and three legged races. It was a day right out of a Norman Rockwell painting, and all this poor guy could think

about was the money he was losing by taking time away from his work. It was, according to this man, a waste of time.

We get so hung up at times on time. We don't want to spend too much time doing something unproductive. Perhaps it's a reflection of the capitalist work ethic that dominates our lives.

I watched a television news magazine one evening which was telling about how Japanese businessmen are dying from overwork at an early age. In Japanese it's called *karoshi*. Young men — 35 or 40 years old — collapse and die suddenly from the stress of their jobs. The government refuses to recognize it's existence; businesses ignore and deny it. But it exists — 16 hour days, 7 day work weeks. There are fathers that never see their children or their wives.

The story told of one young man who collapsed at home. After his death, his children kept a shrine to honor him as is their Buddhist custom — part of the shrine was the chalkboard on which he left his final message the night he died. The chalkboard, you see, was the only way he communicated with his children — he never saw them in person. *Karoshi*.

What are we doing to ourselves?

Paul (or his disciple who wrote the letter) had time on his mind when he wrote to the Ephesians. Jesus had rescued the Ephesian Christians from the darkness of immorality and greed, the letter tells us, and now they are called to live in the light of Christ. The world has blossomed with possibilities thanks to God's grace. The writer wants to make sure that the Ephesians make the most of their time — the most of their life in Christ. The possibilities must not be wasted, he tells them. "Be careful, then, how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of time ..."

The earliest Christians were convinced that the end of the world would occur immediately and that Christ would return soon — within their lifetime. So Paul and others became obsessed with behavior, the obsession reflecting concern that the faithful be mentally, physically, morally, and spiritually prepared for the *eschaton*, the end-time.

The days are filled with time-wasters, the letter warned. Time is precious. If we waste time, then we have not treasured the gift that God has given us. If we waste time, we waste God and we fail to serve God.

And there's the trap — the trap which to this day causes us to panic over wasted time. We're afraid that if we waste time, we dishonor God. Yet, our idea of what is a waste of time may not be the same as God's idea. We're tempted to believe that time must always be profitable or productive. Hence the man at the 4th of July celebration — "I'm losing money by being here ..." — or the problem of *karoshi* in Japan — no time to even hug one's children. But we do not all have to be productive all the time.

Henri Nouwen was a Roman Catholic priest who spent most of his career in prestigious academic circles, for many years teaching at Yale Divinity School. In 1985, he changed his life direction and moved to one of Jean Vanier's L'Arche Daybreak Communities located in Toronto, Canada. There he was chaplain and lived in community among people with and without disabilities. In 1986, Nouwen met Adam, the young man for whom Nouwen was to provide daily care.

Adam had very little ability according to the majority's standards. He couldn't speak or even move without assistance. His life was filled with seizures and to the world Adam was a nobody. Yet Henri Nouwen had to care for him.

In his book *Adam: God's Beloved* which he wrote after Adam's death yet did not publish before his own sudden death just 8 months later in September 1996, Nouwen writes of Adam. He tells of the difficult time he had getting used to having to physically handle another adult human, how he struggled with his own inability to know what to do for this man. Helping Adam meant getting him up at 7:00 am, taking off his pajamas and getting him into a bathrobe, walking him to the bathroom, shaving him, bathing him, choosing his clothes, dressing him, combing his hair, walking him to the kitchen, making him breakfast, sitting with him as he ate, supporting his glass as he drank, brushing his teeth, putting on his coat and hat and gloves, getting him into his wheelchair, and pushing him along the pot-holed street to his day program. Adam would return at 4:00 pm when Nouwen would perform the evening routine.

Nouwen wrote that he gradually got used to Adam's routine and found that he could be through it by 9:00 am and then have the rest of the day to himself.

I must confess, that there were moments when I was impatient and preoccupied by what I was going to do when I had finished Adam's routine. Then, without being conscious of his person, I started to rush him. Consciously, but mostly unconsciously, I hurriedly pushed his arms through his sleeves or his legs through his trousers. I wanted to be sure I was finished by 9:00 am so I could go to my other work.

Right here I learned that Adam could communicate! He let me know that I wasn't being really present to him and was more concerned about my schedule than about his. A few times when I was so pushy he responded by having a grand mal seizure, and I realized that it was his way of saying, 'Slow down, Henri! Slow down.' ... He was clearly asking me if I was willing to follow his rhythm and adapt my ways to his needs. I found myself beginning to understand anew language, Adam's language.

I have a hunch that the new language that Nouwen was learning is the same language that the Psalmist writes of in one of my favorite Psalms — "There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world." (Psalm 19:3-4) The Psalmist writes of creation, but it is true as well of many of the people with disabilities with whom I have built relationships – true of so many people who have disabilities in this world. There are those in this world who have no speech, who have no voice, who have no words — yet their words go out to the end of the world. Adam was one of them.

I think not only was it Adam's language that Nouwen learned but it is *God's language*. It's a language that does not mesh well with our list of a thousand chores to do and zero time to do them. It's a language that does not fit all that well with our understanding of time and productivity and waste and the world.

It's about God's time. Not your time, not my time, not a clock's time. It's not about Henri Nouwen's time. It's about Adam's time. God's time.

Henri Nouwen spent the final years of his life living with Adam.

At first, I had to keep asking myself and others, 'Why have you asked me to do this? Why did I say yes? What am I doing here? Who is this stranger who is demanding such a big chunk of my time each day? Why should I, the least capable of all the people in the house, be asked to take care of Adam and not someone whose needs are a bit less?' The answer was always the same: 'So you can get to know Adam.' Now that was a puzzle to me. Adam often looked at me and followed me with his eyes, but he did not speak or respond to anything I asked him. Adam didn't smile when I did something well or protest when I made a mistake. I wondered if he even recognized me. How would I get to know

him? What, I asked myself, was he sensing? What was his experience with me?

No speech, no words, no voice, no sound. Adam had none of these things. Yet when Adam died almost 10 years after Nouwen had met him, Nouwen realized what this person who had no sound really meant to him.

Here is my counselor, my teacher, and my guide, who could never say a word to me but taught me more than any book, professor, or spiritual director. Here is Adam, my friend, my beloved friend, the most vulnerable person I have ever known and at the same time the most powerful.

Even when there is no sound, there is always God's sound. Even when there is no time, there is God's time. And in God's time they came to know each other and love each other and care for each other.

It is God's idea that we take the time that we need – *Remember the Sabbath day and keep it sacred*. (Exodus) Rabbi Abraham Heschel in his book, *Sabbath*, reminds us that Judaism, the foundation for our faith as Christians, is a religion of time: it finds meaning not in space and the material things that fill space but in time and the eternity that imbues it. "The Sabbath," he argues, "are our great cathedrals." Have we Christians forgotten what God's time is?

In an address to the Trinity Institute of New York, Joan Chittister, Benedictine sister and prolific author of spirituality-focused books said:

The rabbis taught that the purpose of Sabbath was threefold. The first purpose was to free the poor as well as the rich for at least one day a week, and that included the animals, too. Nobody had to take an order from anybody on the Sabbath. The second purpose was to give people time to evaluate their work as God evaluated

creation to see if their work, too, is really life-giving. And the third reason for the Sabbath was to give people a space to contemplate the real meaning of life. If anything has brought the modern world to the brink of destruction, it must surely be the loss of Sabbath.

In *To Life!: A Celebration of Jewish Being and Thinking*, Rabbi Harold Kushner reminds us that there are two reasons for making the Sabbath special. The first is that it is a reminder of Israel's freedom from slavery.

Slaves have to work all the time; free men and women can take a day off for their own pursuits. In the ancient world, slavery was a question of who owned your body. Being able to sleep late and not put your body to the grind of hard labor was the sign of freedom. In the modern world, the issue of slavery is not a question of who owns your body, but who owns your soul and who owns your time.... The highly paid executive who feels he can't take a vacation, who can't take an afternoon off to watch his son pitch in a Little League game or go to his daughter's ballet recital, is a slave. He may own two homes, three cars, and an impressive stock portfolio, but if he doesn't own his own time, he is a slave. Few of us completely own our own time. But if at least once a week, we can claim a day for ourselves, we can be free.

The Sabbath. It's about claiming time for oneself. It's about freedom. It's about God's time. It's about, as the Ephesians letter reminds us, "making the most of the time."

In facing a relentless schedule, Jesus insisted on "wasting" time on children and those who were lonely, on prostitutes and tax collectors, on people who were sick or were marginalized in other ways. So often in the Gospels we find Jesus going off to be alone, to spend some time away from the crowds, making the most of the time that he knew God had given him.

"The second reason given in the Bible [for the Sabbath]," writes Rabbi Kushner, "is a more subtle one":

God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. When we refuse to be beasts of burden, constantly working, when we insist on pausing to take stock of our work and to redefine ourselves by who we are and not just by what we do, we transcend the animal in us and let the godly dimension of our nature emerge."

Sabbath rest is defined first as "leaving the world alone, restraining our impulse to tinker with it... For one day, let well enough alone." Second, Sabbath rest is defined as freedom from obligation. "You don't have to do anything. You don't even have to attend services; you are free to choose to attend, because you have a degree of leisure you don't have on other days." And third, Sabbath rest is a time of "detaching ourselves for a day from all of our problems, everything unpleasant and unfinished."

Is it God's idea for us to work at our jobs 8, or 12, 14, 16 hours a day? Is it God's idea that we should have every minute of every day occupied with something to do? Is it God's idea that everything we do should be profitable and productive?

These are human creations. God has created for us time for freedom, time for renewal, time for detachment, time for remembering who owns your body and who owns your soul.

Harry Chapin, ballad singer of the 70's and 80's recorded a song, *Cat's in the Cradle*, which, literally, brings goose bumps to my skin whenever I hear it. It is the story of a man who has little time for his son as he's growing up:

"But there were planes to catch and bills to pay / He learned to walk while I was away / When you coming home dad? / I don't know when, but you know we'll have a good time then,

son / I'm gonna be like him, yeah, you know I'm gonna be like him"

People are always promising to change their priorities someday soon, but somehow that someday never comes — unless we make time for it. And if we don't make time, we discover like the father in the song that

our children grow up to be just like us — with no time for making the most of time, no time for anyone or anything that doesn't fit that old priority list.

When we don't have time to play, *then* we're wasting time. When we don't have time for family and friends, *then* we're wasting time. When we don't have time for God, *then* we're wasting time.

"There is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation," wrote novelist James Baldwin in *Nobody Knows My Name*, "The challenge is in the moment; the time is always now."

Where is the time to feed our souls on music or art or story? Where is the day on the calendar for gardening or playing with children or staring at the clouds? Where are those few minutes in my Palm Pilot that it takes to stand in line for a hot dog at a 4th of July celebration? The challenge is in the moment — the time for those things is *now*. Not tomorrow. Not next week or next year or in our next lifetime. The time is *now*.

When every demand for time is given equal weight, then we have lost the ability to discriminate between the *truly* important and the *merely* important. God shows no partiality when it comes to giving us the time we need. God created morning and evening — *we* created days and weeks and calendars, minutes and hours and clocks. If we are wise like the Ephesians author calls us to be, we make time for thanking God, for worship and praise and song. If we are wise we allow time for family and friends, for life in the

Spirit and fullness in the community, we'll make time for freedom and renewal.

I have a friend who tries to live her life informed by this quote from Dr. Thomas Arnold Bennett: "We never shall have any more time. We have, and we have always had, all the time there is."

It's a piece of art which keeps the message in front of me – that message that was the opening line of this sermon – it's on my dresser at home, on my computer screen saver, and on the shelf above my desk in the Church Office:

"Everything changed the day he figured out there was exactly enough time for the important things in his life."

And when the days seem to get too busy for that which is God's priority for us, then the days control us, the days become "evil" says the Ephesians letter. "Be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time."

As we leave from this time on this Sabbath, let us live in God's time, play in God's time, work in God's time, be in God's time – not in our own time. Let us make the most of God's time.

Amen.