

Ephesians 5:15-20  
August 16, 2009

## South Plains

sale is time, God's priceless and very limited commodity. But, how do we make the most of the time?

### Making The Most Of The Time

Jay Chronister suggested recently that I had wandered 40 years in the wilderness before coming into the Promised Land of South Plains Presbyterian Church. The truth is actually stranger than that; so I thought I had better make some attempt to justify my 40 years, or at least to follow the advice of Ephesians 5:20, "giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Your kindness in marking this anniversary has spurred me to recall God's providence in giving me wonderful brothers and sisters in Christ who have pulled me and pushed me and walked beside me as I have wandered. Many of you are here today. To you, I want to say, "Keep on!" Although we're in a good place now, we're not out of the woods yet.

The advice to "be careful how you live...", making the most of the time" has been hard for me to follow. Sometimes I have been too careful, and sometimes not careful enough. There's a fascinating business connection behind this verse. The root word in verse 16 comes from the marketplace so that one scholar paraphrases "making the most of the time" as telling us to snap "up all chances of a bargain that are available (Ralph Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon*)." That ought to appeal to our shopping instinct. What is for

One way is to recognize the difference between being wise and being educated. I did pretty well in the education department, and left seminary in 1968 still reluctant to accept the call to ordination, but feeling like I was well educated for ministry. Two events illustrate the difference between wisdom and education, and say much about God's ability to redeem the time. In those days, the ordination examination was a conversation and a couple of papers submitted to a committee of wise teaching and ruling elders. My committee quickly saw that I did not know what I should know about the Old Testament, and that my theology was thin. My teacher Don Shriver sent me back to John Calvin while I worked through an introduction to the Old Testament for five months. That was the first time I could remember failing what I had assumed was an academic challenge. Don Shriver's sermon at my ordination had a most appropriate title: "The Uncertainties of the Ministry."

The challenges continued in my first church. Three weeks after starting work a member died. I realized to my horror that I had no idea how to conduct a funeral. I had an order of service, but no experience with what a grieving family wanted or needed. Providentially, an older Methodist minister named Earl Gibson took part in the service and guided me through it. Wisdom, I was finding, requires experience and judgment as well as book learning.

It also requires a measure of realism not always available to a young person who enjoyed the kind of sheltered childhood I enjoyed. I knew right from wrong, but the statement, “the days are evil” seemed like a quaint exaggeration. Looking back on the excitement of the 1970’s, I would not want to call those days “evil,” but I quickly was confronted with racism on our session, with the My Lai massacre and the whole tragedy of Vietnam, with the painful debate over abortion, and some of the implications of the sexual revolution. These global issues bombarded us from the outside while the little 65 member church in North Carolina struggled with everyday divorce, drug use, alcoholism and domestic violence. Not only time, but wisdom was then and is now a rare commodity. Looking back, I am grateful both for the experiences and for the protective hand of God that was making me wiser.

The other way we make the most of the time according to Ephesians is to “understand what the will of the Lord is.” That seems simple. All I had to do was to look up “Vietnam” and “abortion” and “racism” and “chemical dependency” in my biblical concordance, and find God’s answers. Those answers to current social issues are not easy to find because the context changes and the decisions demand an existential choice as well as biblical understanding. Therefore prayer became more important to me.

When Ephesians 5 says, “Be careful.... Do not be foolish,” that advice sounds too much like what my mother told me when I started driving. So, I suggest we

might paraphrase those words as a reminder that we need to know who we are, our strengths and limitations, and what we are doing. Then, we might avoid foolishness. The best way for Presbyterians to know ourselves is to discover who God is and what God is doing around us.

That knowledge starts with scripture and ends with prayer. Sandwiched in between scripture and prayer is life. Remember the business language behind that phrase ‘making the most of the time?’ Much of life is a shopping trip through a marketplace of ideas where all sorts of bargains are on offer. We can invest most or all of our time in making money. Or, we can put our energy into having fun. Most of us will opt for moderation, buying some of both. We’ll put a lot of time and effort into a job, but save a significant part of life for family and friends. The question is, “What kind of investment will we make in knowing God.”

This letter from scripture has two modest recommendations. The first is “Do not get drunk with wine.” I would amend that for our time as “Do not get drunk with anything that causes the loss of self-control.” The broad category in this verse is ‘debauchery,’ or recklessly abandoning what is right in exchange for a temporary pleasure. Greco-Roman culture in the ancient world almost made a religion out of drunkenness. Dionysus or Bacchus was the god of wine. The secret rituals associated with this god were so dangerous that the Roman senate passed a law against them. The

attraction of this 'religion' was the opportunity to really let go of all the restraints of job, family, and reputation. You can see why it was a secret cult. They could have said, "What happens in the cult of Dionysus stays in the cult of Dionysus." Against that background, the advice to Christians is "Don't get drunk and debauched."

There's a better way, a safer way to lose your worries, anxieties, stress and guilt. This is the second recommendation for investing ourselves in the knowledge of God. "Be filled with the Spirit," says Ephesians 5:18. Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse, "Drink the Spirit of God, huge draughts of him. Sing hymns instead of drinking songs....any excuse for a song to God (*The Message*)."

The great paradox of Christian faith is summed up in the words of Jesus which we find in several gospels and several forms. He's talking about letting go.

Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matt 10:39)

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves...(Matt 16:24)."

Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it. (Lk 17:34)

To sum up, "Make God your ultimate, extreme passion."

I have a personality which the psychologists call "risk averse." In other words, I am very cautious about giving up personal control and letting myself go in any substantial way. That probably accounts for my reluctance to get drunk, but it may also account for my painfully slow decision to get married and as well as my reluctance to accept the call to be ordained to the ministry. Commitment means giving up some control over the future. I suspect that same caution prevents some people from giving themselves to Jesus Christ and following the way of Christ. You will have to decide that for yourselves.

For what it's worth, I am most likely to lose myself in singing, and most often filled with the Spirit when I'm singing among friends. And that is the example given in Ephesians 5 that can satisfy our desire to escape the pressures of life. Better than wine: "Be filled with the Spirit as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts...(v19)." I am sure other people do in other ways. Nevertheless, I believe a good case can be made that congregational singing is the most democratic and most popular way we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

When we sing the psalms, we explore the full catalog of human emotions confronted by God. For years, Presbyterians limited worship to singing the psalms. But Ephesians 5 goes on to include hymns and spiritual songs. Hymns are songs of praise. Spiritual songs would include any music that speaks the language

of faith to the human spirit. Augustine said when we sing, we pray twice.

When I started seminary one of my classmates was an older man who had just finished a stint as conductor of the New Orleans Symphony Orchestra. Fred was sorting out several issues in mid-life. After a few months, he asked for volunteers to sing in a seminary choir with instrumental accompaniment. It was the first time I had sung with an orchestra. Two of my best friends sang tenor. Most of us brought untrained voices, but we loved to sing in church. Under Fred's direction, we learned the discipline of rehearsing with union musicians. He blended our voices and drilled those like me who could not read the notes until we all made melody to the Lord. I did not realize it at the time, but participating in that musical experience opened my ears and spirit to new frontiers of worship. I was beginning to let go, and let myself be filled with the Spirit.

The scripture says "sing ... among yourselves," because whatever style the music takes we are lifting each other up in prayer to God. That's one way to be filled with the Spirit. It's been an essential component in making the most of my time in ministry. Singing is a lot more fun than just being careful, and it's safer than being foolish.

More than anything else, of course, singing allows us to give ourselves away as we give thanks to the Lord. We incarnate thanksgiving as our music engages heart,

lungs, mouths and ears. It is one way we know ourselves as friends and servants of the living God, joined to the heavenly choirs that give voice to praise.

In scripture, "forty" is an all-purpose measure of time: 40 years in the wilderness; 40 days without food; 40 days and nights of rain. While that seems like a long time, it is a moment in biblical history and only the blink of an eye in geological time. The time that matters is right now because this is the day we have to make the most of our time. This is the day to give thanks to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That's my story. I look forward to more years when we can make the most of God's time together.

Eternal God, you make every day new, creating fresh chances for us to live to the fullest, to live abundantly in Jesus Christ. This is the day you have made and we

rejoice in it. Hear our prayers for neighbors, for the church and for ourselves.

When we hear news of a tragedy like the fire at Camp Shenandoah, we are reminded again how precious life is. Comfort the family who lost a child. Strengthen the boys, their families and their leaders so that this trauma can be redeemed in some way to make their lives more full. Heal the sick, be a companion to the lonely and a guide to us all in uncertainty. We lift up Beverly for your care.

The church that you created from the followers of Jesus is a fragile thing without your grace. Raise up among us leaders committed to searching for direction from you and brave enough to move toward your goals. Fill us with compassion and make us tenderhearted toward one another. South Plains would serve you with a growing congregation. Open our arms to all who seek you.

Each of us has our own set of worries and dreams. The economy makes us more cautious with our generosity. Health care is more than an issue for debate. It's a matter of dealing with our own aches and pains, with the quality of our lives and the lives of our loved ones. Teach us to rest in you, to find hope in your promises and zest for each day in the opportunities you provide. For we pray in Jesus' name and as he taught us: Our Father...