



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 10, 2017

“Make It Count”

(Eph. 5:15)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: O God, from whom all good proceeds, grant to us, Your humble servants, Your holy inspiration, that we may set our minds on the things that are right and, by Your merciful guiding, accomplish them; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

So we sent our toddler off to college last Wednesday. Can you believe it? I can't. We helped Jonathan move into his dorm, got his bed set, met his roommate, returned the cart, and when he wasn't looking, slipped a letter under his pillow.

It was time to leave. Gail said her goodbyes and embraced Jon for a long time. Then it was my turn. One last piece of advice: "Jon, don't let this place mess you up. Be who God has made you to be." And then, "I love you Jon." "I love you too, Dad." Wordlessly, Gail and I walked back to the car, lumps burning in our throats.

This one was/is harder because he's the last one. We've been actively parenting since 1991. Now it's time we sit in the back seat of that car and resist the urge to drive.

How could this have happened? A couple minutes ago I was carrying him around, tickling his ribs, trying to bribe him to eat new things. But parental years are like dog years-abridged. And looking back, it's all become blurry.

It's easy to remember life's firsts. First kiss, first love, first baby, first words. But what of life's lasts? The last time your child took hold of your hand while going for a walk. The last time you stooped to tie a shoe. The last time you read a book with your child on your lap, or said a bedtime prayer. We cross those "last time thresholds" unawares. They come uninvited and pass without our noticing that something precious has just flown away. We assume these things will go on forever.

So how do you make it count? How do you make the most of a short life? The psalmist wrote, "Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12). That is, help us appreciate the brevity of life so we can live it out to its fullest, and not look back with regrets.

Paul wrote, “Be very careful how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity.” In Ephesians, Paul insists we are saved by grace, not by works. But this salvation leads to a new life, a life of obedience in contrast to the old way of life without Christ. “You must no longer live as the Gentiles do” Paul says, “who have given themselves over to their desires” (4:17). That’s not how we make the most of life. “You did not come to know Christ this way” he says (4:20). “Put off the old self and put on the new self” (v. 22ff).

Then follows some very straightforward, no-nonsense instruction. Theory gives way to practice.

-v. 26: “In your anger do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”

-v. 28: “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must do something useful with his hands.”

-v. 31: “Get rid of all bitterness, anger and slander.”

-a few verses later: “Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality. This is improper for God’s holy people” (5:3). No ambiguity there.

And then comes our text: “Be very careful how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (5:15).

What does this mean? First, this: we are God’s people. We ought then to live as God’s people. Heaven knows there are all kinds of opportunities for unholy living. But as Christians (a people made holy by the blood of Christ) we must hold ourselves and one another accountable to live this new life, to put on this new self. “Be very careful” about that says Paul, not only for your own sake, but for the sake of your brothers and sisters in Christ, some of whom may be weak in the faith. And for the sake of the young. You don’t want to scandalize them or cause them to fall into sin. “Better a millstone be hung around your neck” said Jesus (Lk. 17:2) “and you be thrown into the sea.”

So first, this is a call for holy living. When time is short, double down on living to God’s glory.

Second, this is a call to realize the value of time. Again, when you waste time, you're wasting your life. It's not that Paul is trying to squeeze more productivity out of you, or prevent you from ever relaxing or recreating. No, to live carefully will include being deliberate about rest, and fun with family and the cultivation of friendships and exercise and the like. It's when we kill or waste time that we are wasting life.

As we carried stuff to and from Jon's dorm room, we kept passing a room where the door was wide open. Inside were two guys sitting in front of large computer screens. They had headphones on and were gaming. Outside, it was a gorgeous day. Through their windows we could hear the UW band practicing next door. Through their windows, we could see sailboats on the lake, and windsurfers. Through their windows we could see students jogging on Lakeshore Path or just strolling and talking. Countless opportunities to engage life were on the other side of those windows, and heaven knows there were countless opportunities to serve others inside that dorm. But they were shooting electronic images of mythical beasts to win a score that just doesn't matter. Wasted time. Wasted life. Time they will not get back. Living as if time is cheap and life will go on forever.

So, 1) live a holy life. 2) recognize the value of time, which leads us into 3) keep an eye out for those God-given opportunities to serve and witness. Paul's referring to those opportunities to do good. Make the most of those opportunities. Galatians 6:10, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." 2 Tim. 4, "Be prepared in season and out" to give a reason for the hope you have in Christ." Take hold of those opportunities. For example, when you visit someone in the hospital, there's no reason why you can't have a short prayer before you leave. If it helps, write it out. There's no shame in that.

Life is short. We don't have much time. Be quick to love and forgive those who travel the way with you. It all starts at home. Luther wrote, "Let the wife make her

husband glad to come home and let him make her sorry to see him leave.” It continues at work. Make that time count too. Again from Luther: “The Christian shoemaker does his duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.” At home, at church, at work, as a citizen, make it count because time is short.

Tomorrow is the anniversary of 9/11. A couple of years ago we toured the 9/11 museum and heard recordings of some of the phone calls people made: those trapped in the twin Towers, and the Pentagon and on United Flight 93. These people knew their lives would likely end in a matter of minutes. So life was reduced to its essentials. Time was short. People were trying to make their words count and to say what really mattered. There’s no record of anyone calling to say, “You know, I never liked you,” or “You hurt my feelings.” There’s no record even of anyone damning the terrorists or saying, “I hate them.” No one said anything unneeded or extraneous or small. Crisis is a great editor. What they said is, “I love you. Tell the kids I love them too.” Todd Beamer of United 93, the one who was overheard to say, “Let’s roll” shortly before that was praying on the phone with a woman he’d never met before, a Verizon Airfone supervisor named Lisa Jefferson. They prayed the Lord’s Prayer together.

“Make the most of every opportunity” Paul wrote, “because the days are evil.” Martin Luther said, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.” He was trying to inspire hope and perseverance. Even when the days are short and evil, there’s still opportunity to do good.

Speaking of hope, it is very comforting to me (and I hope to you) that the angel told Joseph to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins (Mt. 1:21). Jesus knew he did not have much time, so he lived with a sharpened sense of time. He lived purposefully, intentionally, faithfully. He made the most of every opportunity to do good. He lived a holy life to the glory of God and in service

of you and me, and that made him also a fitting sacrifice for our sins.

That's why he came: to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But not just the sin of the world, but for your sin too, for the sin of wasted time, wasted life. He came so that we "might have life and have it to the full" (Jn. 10:10). He died so that we can trust him, and not live under the paralyzing fear of his judgment. For he promised, "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life" (Jn 5:24).

It's also of great comfort to me these days (and I hope to you), that one of his names is Immanuel, God with us (Mt. 1:23). God is with our sons and daughters off at school. Even in places where he is not invited, unwelcome, yet he's there, with them, with his rod and staff because he loves them, and because they are his baptized children.

God is with those we love who are serving in distant lands and in potentially dangerous places. God is with our elderly parents as they struggle to remember to take their pills, or to eat, or to make the appointment.

God is with us, as we experience life's firsts, the new and the exhilarating things. And God is with us as we pass over life's lasts, those hidden thresholds. Maybe he's the one who even nudges us: "Enjoy this. It's a little gift for you right now." But he also has many gifts in mind for you, in fact a whole new life with him that is chalk full of life's firsts and none of life's lasts, a home where "a thousand years are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night" (Ps. 90:4).

Gail and I returned from Madison and Toby was there and was glad to see us and we were glad to see him. He's living out his dog years in good order. I've often wondered if God doesn't give us dogs to teach us how to live short lives, with their unbridled exuberance, their unwavering loyalty, their unqualified love, their quiet nearness when we're sad or sick, their appreciation of simple gifts: a walk in the woods, the smells of an autumn night,

the beauty of fresh snowfall. Toby never, ever gets excited when we open up the laptop or turn on the T.V. But when the doorbell rings, he goes berserk with joy, even if it's just the neighbor asking for a cup of flour or a pinch of ground cloves. It's really annoying (the dog, not the neighbor!) but at the same time, the dog reminds me of who really matters and what really counts.

“Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity.” Amen.

