

Sermon – “Making the Most of the Time”

Sunday, August 16, 2015

Scripture Lessons – 1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14, John 6:51-58

Rev. Trajan McGill

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading tells a story from early in the reign of Solomon, king of Israel. Hear now these words from the book of First Kings, Chapter 2, verses 10 through 12 and Chapter 3, verses 3 through 14.

10 Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. **11** The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. **12** So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established.

... continuing from chapter 3, verse 3:

3 Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. **4** The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. **5** At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." **6** And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. **7** And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. **8** And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. **9** Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?" **10** It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. **11** God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, **12** I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. **13** I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. **14** If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

Our second reading continues with words out of a long speech Jesus gives to the crowd in the 6th chapter of John, from which we have heard excerpts over the last several weeks, in which he discusses himself as the bread of heaven. Listen now for the word of the Lord to you in this reading from John 6:51-58.

51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." **52** The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" **53** So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. **54** Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; **55** for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. **56** Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me,

and I in them. **57** Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. **58** This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

The title of the sermon: "Making the Most of the Time"

The text: "But the one who eats this bread will live forever." John 6:58b

I have always been somewhat fascinated by the concept of competence. Mastery of something, mastery of anything, is remarkable to behold. It may be admiring the perfect alignments and joints of top-notch carpentry, or watching with awe as a skilled teacher quiets and captivates an unpredictable classroom full of unruly students, somehow stirring them to interested learning in a subject they had no idea they cared about. It may be absorbing the sensory delight of a well-executed meal that has been cooked with culinary finesse, the toolkit of ingredient, utensil, and technique made manifest in the artistry of the visual presentation, the aroma of anticipation, the crunch of the well-placed texture, and the skillful balance of optimum flavor, all with the numerous preparatory steps carried out and timed perfectly to produce different finished plates for multiple diners at the same time.

Or think of the composition of a first-rate novel, inventive plot and real-seeming characters woven together to bring you into an imagined world where you can reside almost entirely unaware that you are reading words on a page until the real world interrupts momentarily or you reach the end, and the overpowering desire to jump back in serving to exhibit full-scale admiration for the craft of the writer. Consider the calm proficiency of the emergency room doctor or nurse, making rapid assessments and careful but quick decisions, changing course on the fly with agility when conditions change suddenly, a small team smoothly wading into chaos and putting it under control.

On our recent staff trip to Montreat, one evening I saw a youth choir perform, their director playing the organ, and when a nervous teen came in to sing the first line of a verse in the wrong part of the scale, the director, with just the right timing and with no overt reaction, shifted one hand from harmony to include melody for the second line, giving just enough musical hint to the singer to move to the right place. But he then continued with that hand to improvise a melodically related figure for the third line, giving the impression to the hearer that the accompaniment was actually written that way, rather than allowing the second line to stick out as different from the rest and thereby expose what he was doing in correcting the singer. The whole thing was so subtle and quick that I am pretty sure at least half of the people listening had no idea that the singer had gotten off-track and been put back on, which was only as apparent to me as it was because I happened to be sitting in the exact right spot to watch his hands playing and see what he was doing. And of course our own Dale Rogers, being someone whose artistic expertise is in exactly that sort of thing, and sitting right next to me, had noticed the same moment of skilled solo accompaniment.

Mastery of craft or art is intriguing like that, in that it is not only found in the artistry one readily notices and admires—the outstanding musical performance, the quickly solved medical issue, the well-written book, the superb plate of food—but also in the artistry one does not ordinarily see at all—the subtle, quick adjustment, the editing and rewriting, the pre-planning, study, rehearsal, and careful coordination of numerous factors invisible and unknown to the outside observer.

Sometimes, because of this, people really only discover the magnitude of what mastery requires when they find themselves in a situation which demands it of them. Solomon, featured in our first reading today, has grown up as the son of a king, and has gone through a difficult and complex process of attaining an uncontested throne of his own, but when he arrives there, he still finds himself unsure of what to do with it, intimidated by the enormity of the job. He describes himself in this context as only a child¹, who does not truly know how to do this work. “Your servant,” he pleads to God, “is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?”²

This kind of awareness of our own incompetence in the face of what is before us is often only arrived at when we cross the line from being observers to actually occupying the seat of responsibility. Taking on a position of authority opens one’s eyes. This is certainly fresh in my own mind, having been given only recently the work of standing in this pulpit and attempting to teach things about God, and having also recently come into the intimidating responsibility of parenthood. As many of you have known a lot longer than I, having charge of a small human being who knows nothing, and guiding that person in intellectual, physical, moral, and spiritual growth all the way from scratch up to, it is to be hoped, a capable, good adult, is about as overwhelming a project as can be imagined.

Maybe it is because we constantly navigate in life into different, new places where we have to learn, and where others have gone before us and seemingly done a good job, where we don’t even know how to begin, that we all share a certain fascination with seeing pure, high-level expertise at work. Hollywood and best-selling authors know this, and our movie screens and bookstores are constantly full of stories where the lead character is, or becomes, the best, the most capable, the perfect virtuoso of his or her craft.

We are entertained by master spies whose craftiness outdoes all others, and by elite warriors, fighters, and swordsmen who make their way through battlefields preposterously casting aside dozens of enemies as if they are just out for a vigorous walk, until they reach the evil mastermind at the other end of the fight, who is nearly as good and poses the only real threat. We watch great wizards of magic, equally great wizards of technology, detectives who always get it figured out, and every sort of hero who saves the day by being the sole person who sees the one thing that all others missed, who has the one skill or talent that cannot be matched.

And magic is a good thing to mention here, because all of this is really a magical depiction of expertise. We love to think of it as a perfect thing which one can be endowed with or attain, because we love to imagine ourselves arriving at expertise of that sort, or at least being in the hands of people with expertise of that caliber. It has only been a gradual realization for me in life, as I first took on adulthood, and then career, family, and new career, that expertise doesn’t work this way for real. Mastery uncovered, and encountered in real life, is very different from the hyperbole we use in describing it. It is always clouded by imperfect vision of circumstances, obstructed by incomplete experience of the universe, full of arbitrary, on-the-spot decisions, and regularly driven off-course by other character traits competing against wisdom.

¹ See 1 Kings 3:7.

² 1 Kings 3:8-9 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

To be sure, skill is a real thing, experience is valuable, and lifelong training can give a person far more reliability in any field. But as we go on in life, if we spend enough time in the company of experts in one thing or another, we eventually learn that having a mastery of things is not as clear and binary an accomplishment as we would like it to be. If you have ever been in the situation of working alongside the experts in any field, you may have experienced this disorienting fact first in the form of feeling a nagging fear that you are the one fraud among the truly capable... but if you stay there long enough, with an objective eye toward things, you will come to the surprising and somewhat disturbing realization that everyone is, to a large degree, making things up as they go in life.

I call it somewhat disturbing because we really want to believe that we can make everything right in the world, and fix all the problems, just by finding the true experts to assign to the task. The idea that many problems, among them some of the most important problems, are too complex for anybody at all to understand them entirely and do any better than taking their best stab at them, is not something we really want to hear. Much of our culture is formed around labeling people as experts and then expecting perfect wisdom from them.

But I'll tell you what you find when you go behind the curtain. If you are lucky, you'll find people who are just doing their best based on accumulated experience and purposeful study of their task. If you're not lucky, you'll find there people who are hiding a lot of nothing behind meaningless credentials, or whose purpose is gain for themselves and whose real expertise is in selling themselves as experts. But just sticking even with those doing their best, that's all they can do.

When I was a firefighter, I know I wasn't the only one who marveled a little bit at how different it was to be outside the perimeter of the scene, where it looks like everyone knows exactly his or her role at all times, and those in charge confidently "have procedures for this", whatever "this" may be; as contrasted with being inside, where you know that there aren't two emergencies in the world that are identical or exactly fit the textbook training, and so all the standard operating procedures in the world will only get you as far as having some hard-learned building blocks on top of which you still have to make it up as you go, based on educated guesses and working hypotheses. This may be all that we can truly expect from expertise anywhere.

But the problems in the world are real. And that means mastery, competence, proficiency, wisdom...whatever you call it, the world needs it. If the human expertise in the world is not the kind of completed perfection we would like it to be, where do we find it for real? What is real wisdom?

We ask this question all the more if we happen across scriptural words like those in the fifth chapter of the epistle to the Ephesians: "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but 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, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."³

³ Ephesians 5:15-20 (NRSV).

This kind of admonition ramps up the importance of wisdom by adding urgency to the right-now. “Making the most of the time” is what we are told we should be doing, reminding us both of the importance of wise living and the short time in which we have to do it.

And this, having only a short time on earth in which to do whatever we will do, is not only rather frightening, it is something our culture is as confused about as it is about anything. Perhaps you are familiar with the recently-become-widespread expression “YOLO,” Y-O-L-O. Popular especially among younger people, it stands for “You only live once,” and is most commonly employed as a one-word justification for doing something enjoyable in the moment, even if it means taking risks. Because occasionally these are absurd and reckless risks, and because the expression shot to eye-rolling popularity partly on Twitter, with a hashtag attached to it, I heard somebody once describe “YOLO” as “*carpe diem* for less intelligent people”, which I found amusing, if somewhat harsh.

Of course, I’m about to be a whole lot harsher, because there is one fundamental and inescapable problem, from a Christian perspective, with the declaration “you only live once,” which is that it is false. Not merely wrong, but the *exact opposite* of what our faith asserts. We don’t believe that we live only once. We proclaim that there is a resurrection, followed by eternal life. And if that is true, it probably ought to change things a little for us, and we probably should be a little cautious about heeding life philosophies that presume the basic assertion of our faith is incorrect.

Even if it were true that you only live once, I’m not convinced that what follows from that is what we think. If we are all wrong, here in church, and death is simply the end of us, then ultimately it does not matter *at all* whether we got a chance to enjoy life, or if we got around to any of the things on our so-called “bucket list”. There will be no self left afterwards to whom it could matter, nobody remaining to care. A person who no longer exists in any form at all is not any better or worse off for having dared to live boldly or for having failed to do so; the outcome is voided to nothing either way.

But interestingly, the Ephesians passage we just heard, which certainly believes we live again, nevertheless asks us to make the most of our time and live wisely in it. And Jesus himself seems to approach the subject with a great deal of urgency as to how we live this particular life, specifically *because* there is something to follow it, and what we do now *will* matter later in some way. “[T]he one who eats this bread will live forever,”⁴ he says, and to “bear fruit” is what he repeatedly insists we do.⁵

What makes this a bit worrisome is that the path of wise and fruitful living is not always clear. We seek to understand what to do with ourselves, and we are hit with passages such as Micah 6:8: “[W]hat does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”⁶ These are beautiful words, and they sound simple, but humility is difficult, kindness is challenging, and justice...well, discerning justice is only easy to those who have never had to administer it. The kind of perfect wisdom, competence and mastery of life and its tasks that we long for is not within the reach of human beings alone. “[T]he wisdom of this world is foolishness with God,” we hear in 1 Corinthians.⁷

⁴ John 6:58b (NRSV).

⁵ See Matthew 3, Matthew 7, John 15, and assorted other passages.

⁶ Micah 6:8 (NRSV).

⁷ 1 Corinthians 3:19a (NRSV).

And so we have nowhere to go but back to Solomon's plea. It might well be all our plea. When the letter to the Ephesians tells us to make the most of the time, it tells us what that requires. "[U]nderstand what the will of the Lord is," it says, and "be filled with the Spirit."⁸ And so we pray together the words of Solomon, as we face our own places in the world: "O Lord my God," he implores, "I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in." "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind... able to discern between good and evil."⁹ May it be so for us all. Amen.

⁸ From Ephesians 5:17-18 (NRSV).

⁹ From 1 Kings 3:7-9 (NRSV).