

Filled with the Spirit

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
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Ephesians 5:15-20



Time is a gift, and I want to thank you for the gift of time for Continuing Education. I spent this past week at YMCA of the Rockies at Estes Park right outside Rocky Mountain National Park. I made the most of my time there as the days were filled with worship, learning, community, and hiking. While enjoying the beauty of God's creation on a hike that wove along Glacier Creek and then up to Bible Point, I learned about the beautiful and inspiring aspen trees.

Above ground aspens rise as individuals but below ground they are united with one interconnected root system. Aspens are the most expansive growth of trees to share a common root system. Through this intricate root system, they communicate by sending signals, sharing nutrients, and passing messages. When a tree is sick the whole group is aware, and healthy trees can send food to those who need it. Aspen groups work as one for the good of all. One might say they are wise. Aspens are one living organism in one living community at the same time. They are all connected even if it isn't obvious to the unaware hiker.

"Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil."

Another translation begins, "Pay careful attention" which I think better conveys the spirit of the message. "Be careful" sounds like an authoritarian voice telling you what to do. "Pay careful attention" sounds like a loving teacher encouraging you to be aware and intentional with how you live.

It is natural for us to read this passage as instructions for how we, as individual followers of Christ, are to live. After initially reading the text, I began some personal pondering of my own. Do I live as a wise person? How can I make the most of the time? How do I spend time understanding what the will of the Lord is? Do I open myself to being filled with the Spirit?

Then I reminded myself that Ephesians is a letter written for a community to remind them that they are now one regardless of their backgrounds. In the first half of Ephesians, Paul is reminding the people who they are in Christ, as their old life has gone and the new life in Christ has begun. In this second half of Ephesians, Paul is building on this identity in Christ by offering instructions regarding Christian conduct.

In this passage, Paul is reminding the people of Ephesus how to live a lifestyle that God desires. Paul is emphasizing, encouraging, and engaging the people to live as Jesus lived. Pay careful attention. Paying careful attention is difficult to do at the rapid pace many of us live. Our culture tells us that the way to make the most of time is to stay busy. Many of us wear busy as a badge of honor.

Someone asks, “How are you?” and you might reply, “I am good. Life is busy!”

But I do not think filling every moment of our day is what Paul meant by making the most the time. Rushing through life trying to make every moment productive is exhausting and can cause us to miss out on the needs and gifts that surround us.

Wise living often comes with a slower pace, a pace that makes space for listening to God’s voice over the voices of society that tell us that we must do more or be more because we are not enough. Living wisely is listening to God’s voice telling us we are enough because we are beloved children of God and part of the body of Christ, so we should make the most of the time.

How do we, as a congregation, make the most of the time? We pay careful attention to those around us and listen to how we can care for one another. We pass the peace and pray for one another throughout the week. We walk across Wilson Hall to greet someone or invite another to lunch. We recognize where the Spirit is nudging us to serve and respond, because when each of us serves where the Spirit is calling then our congregation is indeed making the most of the time by letting the Spirit fill us.

Where is the Spirit nudging you? Is it working in the Meals on Wheels kitchen to make the delicious meals or spending one hour a month delivering those meals to our neighbors who benefit from the lovingly prepared hot meal? Is it teaching our children during Wonder Hour, or being an Adult Participant with our youth, or leading a small group? Is it serving on a church committee or as a weekly office volunteer? Each hour offered in response to God’s grace is time spent wisely making the most of the time given to us and allowing us to be filled with the Spirit.

Paul goes on to tell us that we need to pay careful attention to how we live because the days are evil. Because the days – the culture, the times – are filled with hatred, fear, and cynicism, we must be intentional in our living. If we are not careful, we may live in ways that are unwise and hurtful to others which certainly wouldn't be making the most of the time God has given us.

We are each a follower of Christ, and we are siblings in Christ united as one church family. Our interconnected roots run deep but in ways that aren't necessarily apparent to the world. Like the aspens, we are one living organism in one living community at the same time. The life of the individual and the life of the community are inextricably knit together. What happens to one aspen happens to the group. What happens to one of us happens to our congregation.

The aspens know when to send nutrients to one another. The trees that are close to water are able to absorb and send the water to other trees that need it. We can learn so much from aspens and from all of nature when we pay careful attention.

The aspens seem to have the wisdom that Paul is encouraging us to live into. Borrowing the words of Mark Nepo, the author of *More Together Than Alone*, "We need aspen sensitivity, aspen memory, and aspen compassion."¹ As a faith community, we need aspen sensitivity - the ability to pay careful attention to one another recognizing needs. As a faith community, we need aspen memory – the ability to remember one another and each other's needs. As a faith community, we need aspen compassion – the ability to feel each other's pain and show mercy. I would add that we also need aspen action. As a faith community, we need aspen action – the ability to respond to the insights gathered through sensitivity, memory, and compassion.

If we pay careful attention to aspens, we have a wonderful image for the earlier words from Ephesians which I preached on a few weeks ago. Being rooted and grounded in love like the aspens involves interconnectedness in ways the world does not see. When we are rooted and grounded in love, we are continually aware of the needs of each individual and the needs of the whole. This awareness then leads us to respond to those needs with acts of love that benefit both the individual and the community.

¹ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/fieldnotesonliving/2018/06/25/the-aspen-grove/>

Pay careful attention to how you live so you live as wise people making the most of the time by discerning the will of the Lord which allows you to be filled with the Spirit evoking an organic response of gratitude which cannot be contained.

This organic response of gratitude which cannot be contained is expressed in today's text through music. Being filled with the Spirit can certainly lead to singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, but this joy and gratitude can be expressed in countless ways.

I witness this outpouring of gratitude each Sunday. The welcoming spirit of hospitality at FPC is a byproduct of uncontainable and uncontrollable gratitude that erupts when a community is deeply connected. The interconnectedness is evident through your caring for one another, making the most of the time, discerning the will of the Lord, and opening yourself to be filled by the Spirit.

Wise living is that which stems from making the most of the time by discerning the will of the Lord. We are at a specific time of discerning the will of the Lord in the life of our congregation.

We are in a season of tapping into our roots and reminding ourselves who we are and whose we are. This congregation is filled with wise people, but when we remember our deep roots and lean into our interconnectedness, we are an even wiser people together than we could ever be as individuals.

Let us continue to pay careful attention to how we live so we live as wise people making the most of the time by discerning the will of the Lord which will open us to be filled with the Spirit evoking an organic response of gratitude which cannot be contained.

May it be so. Amen.