

Stewarding Our Days

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Psalms 90:12-17

So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.
Turn, O LORD! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us,
and as many years as we have seen evil.
Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.
Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!

Hebrews 4:12-16

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates to the point that it separates the soul from the spirit and the joints from the marrow. It's able to judge the heart's thoughts and intentions.

No creature is hidden from it, but rather everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of the one to whom we have to give an answer. Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Stewarding Our Days

I want to begin this morning with a video titled, “The Time You Have (In Jelly Beans)”.¹

“Teach us to count our days,” the psalmist prays, you only have so many jelly beans left, *carpe diem*, you only live once, make the most of every moment, live in the now, what will you do with your one wild and precious life?

Last week we read from the book of Job and considered what it looks like to be stewards of our suffering. This week’s psalm seems to be setting us up for a conversation about how we steward our time. The trouble is, it’s almost as challenging to talk about how we spend our time as it is to talk about how we spend our money.

On the one hand, as one of your pastors, I need you to give some of your time to the church—the nominating committee is getting ready to meet and we’ll need some of you to step into leadership roles, with a smaller number of you worshipping in person, we need more of those of you who are here to help record, serve as ushers, Sunday School shepherds, and nursery helpers. With a congregation that is aging and experiencing more health concerns, we need more of you to deliver meals and help transport people to and from church and the occasional doctor’s appointment.

In the same way that we need your money to keep the lights on and the doors open, we need your time to be a church that is welcoming to children and their parents, that cares for its members who are experiencing hardship, and that reaches out into the community. And, in the same way that many of you have experienced financial constraints and challenges because of COVID, I know that many of you are exhausted and worn out by all of the decisions and extra work this COVID time has required.

Which is why, on the other hand, as one of your pastors, I also want to invite you to practice the spiritual discipline of saying ‘no’ when someone comes and asks for more of your time. I want to remind you that you’re of no use to anyone if you’re exhausted and worn out.

But I also still want Covenant to be known a church that embraces kids with open arms and gives their parents a break, if only for an hour on Sunday mornings. I want us to be the kind of church where, when someone comes home from the hospital, meals show up on the door for more nights than they need. I want us to be the church that we have been for so long even though we’re 18 months into a pandemic that seems like it’s going to be with us for the long haul and we’re all worn through. And so, even as I want to invite you into the spiritual discipline of saying, ‘no’, I also want and need you to say ‘yes’ when someone from nominating calls, and I want you to volunteer for all the things on the sign-up sheet in your pew.

Which leaves us, or me at least, in something of a quandary. What does it look like to count our days? To be a good steward of the jelly beans left in our pile? How do we know when we’re

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOKsW_NabEk

doing too much or not enough? How do we know which of the many things vying for our time and attention are worthwhile? How do we know when to say 'yes' and when to say 'no'?

I feel as though I a spoiler alert is appropriate at this point in the sermon so you can manage your expectations—I don't have the answers to these questions. But, I have read a lot of time management and self-help books that purport to answer questions like these and so I know that all good answers have numbers in them (The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, The 80/20 Principle, The 5am Club, The 12 Week Year, you get the idea), and so I have for you, if not answers, Three Scriptural Suggestions to Shape You Into a Superior Steward of Seconds.

Number One (and I promise, these don't all start with S, my ability to alliterate has its limits): Sabbath. In its biblical form, Sabbath is the practice of taking one day of rest every week. It's a day in which to refrain from work and to engage in activities that fill you up, so that you can return to work refreshed. It is the practice of saying 'no' so that later you can say 'yes'. In our modern world, it is increasingly difficult to practice Sabbath as it is outlined in the Bible (though there are certainly communities that do). For most of us, even if we have a day we can take off from work, there are still children and families to be fed, houses to be cleaned, sports and activities to be attended, and any number of obligations that require our time and attention regardless of whether or not we find these obligations to be restorative and life-giving. And for those who have retired, well, I'm told the asks only increase, the demands for your time only greater, and the idea of setting a day apart can feel contrived.

Yet, regardless of your life situation, the practice of Sabbath offers an opportunity to intentionally engage in activities that fill you up, and to regularly break your routine so that you can experience time differently. You might not be able to do it for a full day every week, but you can be intentional about finding activities that energize you and finding ways to break your routines so that you can experience time differently. Practicing Sabbath won't automatically make you a Time Steward Ninja, but it does help to shift your perspective on time and what is worth time and what is not. Practicing Sabbath, even when it feels contrived or like a luxury you can't afford, reminds us that God is the giver of all time, that we are not as important as we think and that the world can survive without us for a little while.

Number Two: Choose Life. In the first five books of the Old Testament, the primary narrative is the story of the Israelites being rescued from slavery in Egypt, wandering in the desert, and finally finding their way to the Promised Land. It is a long journey that parallels, in many ways, the long psychological process of embracing freedom after having been enslaved. One of the challenges for Moses, as the leader, is helping the people to understanding the difference between the commandments and laws of God and the commands and rules of Pharaoh. One of the ways in which Moses tries to do this is by equating the laws of God with life. Choose life, he urges the people—choose a way of living that is life-giving and life-sustaining (Deut. 30:19). Don't live as the rest of the world lives, but live by God's commandments because they are life-giving. It is a sentiment echoed by Jesus in John's Gospel when he proclaims that he has come that we might have life and have it abundantly (10:10).

Choose the activities and the commitments that create life and are life-giving, both for you and for others. Trust that the things that aren't life-giving to you are life-giving to someone else and leave those activities for them. You can't do this 100% of the time of course, but as much as you can, choose life, and choose it abundantly, both for yourself and for others.

And finally, Number Three: Give it Away. My spiritual director likes to remind me that time and money operate in much the same way in that there is always enough to be able to give some away. It's her way of saying what Jesus taught when he said that to gain your life you must lose it, that to be first you must be last, and, as Francis of Assisi put it, that it is in giving that we receive (c.f. Matt. 16:25, 10:39).

Practice sabbath, choose life, give it away. It's not a Magic 8 Ball, of course. None of these, in and of themselves, will tell you how best to steward the days you have been given; but, when the nominating committee calls, as you decide what to circle on the volunteer sheet in your pew, as you field requests for your time and attention, my prayer for you is that you will say 'yes' to the things that give you life, that you'll remember that there is always enough time to give some away, and that the practice of Sabbath will help you know how best to spend the jelly beans left in your pile.

Amen.