

Slow down!

Ephesians 5:15-20

August 19, 2012

Slow down ...

I knew, even before we left Maine, that this would be the title of my first sermon after returning from vacation. Now I didn't think about work all that much in Maine, and I didn't think about all of you all that much in Maine -- sorry! -- but as our days left in Blue Hill were coming to an end and I began to think about returning to Waterloo and getting back to work, the same image came to my mind again and again -- going slow!

No images of shifting gears, or pushing down on the gas pedal, or hitting the ground running, or jumping in with both feet. Just this one image -- going slow, moving deliberately and carefully, taking things as they come, taking each moment as it comes, not focussing on lists of things to do, but focussing on just being here.

So, what do you think? Am I stuck in vacation mode? Has my mind been addled by too much free time? After all, you say, vacation is not "real" life. And this is the way "real" life works: if you are going to succeed, if you want to get ahead, if you want to do well, if you want to be the best, at least the best you can be, you have to think smarter and work harder and go faster.

I read an article this week in USA Today about "tech moms" in Silicon Valley, women balancing family with work at new technology start-ups. They say that "having it all" is possible with the proper network of friends, a supportive partner, outsourcing and ruthless time management." Ruthless time management -- finding ways to do more in less time -- that's the key to a full and successful and good life.

Do you know what I like about Maine? It's not New York or Boston!

Do you know what I like about Iowa? It's not San Francisco or LA!

We know something about slowing down! Not about ruthlessly managing time, but about having time, having time for things that matter, having time for people that matter. We know that time is precious.

Time is precious. But that doesn't mean we go faster and faster so we can make the fullest possible use of a limited and diminishing resource. No, because time is precious, we slow down, "redeeming the time," saving it from

just slipping away and being lost by savoring each and every moment, treasuring each and every moment, as it comes.

“Redeeming the time.” That’s the literal translation of the phrase Paul used in his letter to the Ephesians. The Good News Bible translates the phrase: “Make good use of every opportunity you have.”

Make good use of every opportunity you have, because these are evil days.

When I first read this text, it seemed to suggest the opposite of my theme. Make good use of every opportunity you have! Maximize the time! Don’t waste a minute! Do as much as you can!

But, then, as I read it over again, I heard it differently. Make good use of every opportunity you have. Make good use of each and every opportunity you have. Don’t miss this moment. Slow down!

This what it means: to value each moment, to savor each moment, to invest yourself fully in each moment, to redeem each moment, to make full use of its unique opportunities and its unique blessings as it comes.

When you slow down, you notice things you might otherwise miss. When you slow down, you notice people you might otherwise miss. When you slow down, you aren’t already getting on to the next thing, the next experience, the next moment, before you have fully encountered this thing, this experience, this moment.

We call ourselves followers of Jesus. We want to go where he goes, do what he does, live as he lives. What did Jesus do? How did he live? His time was precious, his life was brief, and the scope of his calling was enormous, but Jesus went about slowly. He stopped, spending extended periods of time alone, praying with his God. He stopped, spending extended periods of time with people, people who came to him, people who searched him out, people who simply crossed his path.

He seemed not in a hurry, not worried about being sidetracked, not anxious to stay on some arbitrary schedule. He had time for interruptions, time for people, all kind of people -- men and women, adults and children, important people and not so important people -- because they were all important to him.

For Jesus, the one person here and now in front of him mattered. For Jesus, the one moment here and now mattered. He didn’t worry about wasting time or not having enough time, but simply made good use of every opportunity he had.

Make good use of every opportunity you have, because these are evil days.

What about the second half of the phrase: “because these are evil days?” Does it mean we must make good use of every opportunity we have because there isn’t much time left? Because evil is overtaking this world and we must act while we still can?

Or does it mean that in the midst of evil days, in the presence of pervasive evil, we must make good use of every opportunity we have to witness to another way? To use every opportunity to show by our words and our actions what it is that does matter?

The nature of evil is to lie and deceive and confuse, to blind us to things that do matter and to entice us to run after things that don’t matter. It is a lie that more is better. It is a lie that busyness is of itself a virtue. It is a lie that people that have more and do more matter more.

Evil lies and deceives and confuses. Evil promises us everything and leaves us nothing. When we crave the thing we don’t have, we overlook and even forfeit the value of the thing we do have. And when we are already living for the moment to come, we miss the wonder and glory and goodness of this moment.

Evil tells us to speed up, to live for what can be, and we run right past what is.

There was a moment during the last week of our vacation ... Lynne and I were in our kayaks paddling on a large bay, rock-bound, spruce-covered islands to either side of us, the expanse of open ocean stretching out behind us, the profile of Blue Hill on the distant horizon, a steady breeze pushing us down the bay, and gentle rollers lifting our boats as we paddled. I turned to her then and said, “We are here. We are here!”

That moment, like all moments passed, and now I am not there. But in that moment I was and I knew it and I was filled with delight ...

Now I am here. I am here! We are here! We are here, in this moment. Let’s make good use of every opportunity we have. Let’s make good use of this moment. Slow down! Savor the moment! Enjoy this moment! We are here! God is here!

Slow down.

Maybe I am still stuck in vacation mode, and yet ... I like vacations, don't you? I am happy when I am on vacation, aren't you? Is that unreal? Or could it be that when we slow down and take the time to taste each moment as it comes, we recover something very real?

When we slow down, when we take time, when we pay attention -- whether we are on vacation or at school, whether we're working or retired, whether we have lots to do or not much to do -- we do recover something real ... this. This time. This place. This life. We reconnect with the things that are there in front of us. We reconnect with the people who are there in front of us. We remember who we are. We remember who God is.

And we remember that we are not God. Because when we slow down, we realize that the world doesn't depend on us, the world doesn't revolve around us, and that's a good thing.

Make good use of every opportunity you have, because these are evil days.

Slow down. Enjoy this day. Make good use of this day, because this day is God's gift ...