

## **PENTECOST 13B - 8/19/18**

### ***The Secret of Life* (Ephesians 5:15-20)**

Some of you may remember the 1991 film *City Slickers* starring Billy Crystal. He plays Mitch, a confused, dissatisfied, thirty-something baby boomer who sells radio advertising time for a living in New York City. He is also struggling with this vague, haunting sense that somehow life is passing him by. Basically, he's having a mid-life crisis.

One day he visits his son's school on career day, along with some other fathers, to talk about his job; one that he's not all that excited about anymore, truth be told. To make matters worse, his son has apparently told his classmates that his dad is a submarine captain. So the reality is a big disappointment; for everyone involved, including Mitch himself.

And when he gets up to speak, he quickly stuns his son's class as he goes off on this spontaneous riff...

"Value this time in your life, kids. Because this is the time in your life when you still have choices. And it goes by so quickly.

"When you're a teenager, you think you can do anything... and you do. Your twenties are a blur. Your thirties, you raise your family, you make a little money, and you think to yourself, 'What happened to my twenties?'

"Your forties, you grow a little pot belly, you grow another chin. The music starts to get too loud, and one of your girlfriends from high school becomes a grandmother.

“Your fifties, you have a minor surgery. You’ll call it a procedure, but it’s a surgery. Your sixties, you’ll have a *major* surgery, the music is still loud, but now it doesn’t matter because you can’t hear it anyway.

“Seventies, you and the wife retire to Fort Lauderdale. You start eating dinner at 2:00 in the afternoon; you have lunch around 10:00; breakfast the night before. You spend most of your time wandering around malls looking for the ultimate soft yogurt and muttering, ‘How come the kids don’t call? How come the kids don’t call?’

The eighties, you’ll have a major stroke, and you end up babbling with some Jamaican nurse, who your wife can’t stand, but who you call mama...” Then he looks out at the bewildered kids and asks, “Any questions?”

Now that’s a bit of an exaggeration, to be sure. But not completely untrue or unrealistic. At least the part about life passing by so quickly.

When we first received word that our daughter and son-in-law were expecting, everyone kept asking, “Aren’t you excited?” And I have a confession to make. My confession is that I had mixed feelings, to be perfectly honest. Obviously, I was very happy for my daughter and her husband; *truly* happy, don’t get me wrong! But a part of me... a very small part of me perhaps, a *selfish* part even, was like: “Wait a second! I’m *too young* to be a grandfather!”

Like that fictional character played by Billy Crystal in *City Slickers* – by the way, to be 39 years old again, hmm that’d be nice – well, just like that character, I was suddenly struck by the feeling that my life was somehow slipping away, right before my eyes. In other words, I don’t

*feel* old enough to be a grandfather; even though *I am*, of course. But in my mind, at least, I have a lot more that I want to experience; a lot more that I want to accomplish. Yet at 62, even if I'm lucky enough to live to be 93 like my dad, I'm already two-thirds of my way through life! Talk about a sobering thought; a sobering reality...

Back to the movie... If you recall, Mitch and two of his buddies, both facing their own mid-life crises, decide to go out to New Mexico to recapture whatever it is they're missing, or have *lost*, by joining a cattle drive headed up to Colorado. In another memorable scene, Mitch is riding along with Curly, the trail boss – played by Jack Palance – who's a *real* cowboy, by the way.

But after listening to Mitch for a bit, Curly shakes his head derisively and says, “You city folk! You spend 50 weeks a year getting knots in your rope. Then you think two weeks up here will untie ‘em for ya’.”

After a short pause, Curly asks Mitch, “Do you know what the secret of life is? Mitch replies eagerly, “No, what?” And Curly answers by holding up one gloved index finger, “This.”

“Your finger?” asks a confused Mitch. “One thing,” answers Curly. “Just one thing. You stick to *that* and everything else don't mean... (squat)”

“That's great,” Mitch responds. “But what's the one thing?”

“That's what *you* gotta figure out,” Curly replies cryptically before riding away...

One thing... The secret of life is *one* thing... A bit of old west, cowboy wisdom, perhaps, but *also* the message of our second reading this morning as well.

Our reading from Ephesians puts it *this* way, “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...

Don't be foolish; be wise. For a Christian, says our reading, the secret of life is *also* one thing... And that one thing is *understanding* the will of the Lord.

You see, there's a difference between wisdom and knowledge. We live in a time of unprecedented knowledge. First, just think about all of the discoveries and developments that have occurred during the past 100 years. Then consider this:

- Until the year 1900, it is estimated that human knowledge doubled approximately every century.
- By the end of World War II, knowledge was doubling every 25 years.
- Currently, it is estimated that, on average, human knowledge is doubling every 12 *months*.
- And, back in 2013, it was even predicted that our knowledge would soon be doubling every 12 *hours*. (Perhaps we're there already. Who knows?)

But *wisdom*? That's something else, isn't it? Wisdom is in far shorter supply. At least it *seems* that way.

Proverbs 9:10 – the same book and chapter as our first reading this morning, just several verses later – says, “The fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom.” Or, as our reading from Ephesians seems to be saying, “Understanding the will of the Lord is *also* the beginning of wisdom.”

Again, we’re not talking about knowledge here. We’ve got plenty of that. No, we’re talking about wisdom.

Now one way of thinking about it is this: Knowledge is knowing *what* to do. Skill is then knowing *how* to do it. But wisdom is knowing *when* to do it. After all, we have all this knowledge and skill. But wisdom? Wisdom often seems to be in short supply.

And the specific wisdom our reading is talking about here is the wisdom to make the most of our time; the wisdom to know *when* to do certain things and, conversely, when *not* to do them. Be careful how you live, says our reading. Use your time wisely; not foolishly.

Our reading goes on. “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.” Now, to be sure, drunkenness is a *form* of debauchery. The word “debauchery” simply refers to “extreme indulgence in bad or immoral behavior,” which certainly *includes* but is by no means *limited* to excessive alcohol consumption.

Now, for some reason, translators have chosen to use this word “debauchery” here. But another way of translating this is by using the word “dissipation.” To *dissipate* means “to spend or use up wastefully or foolishly.” And that certainly seems to be more in line with what the writer of Ephesians has been getting at all along, isn’t it? In other

words, don't be *emptied* by wasteful or foolish behavior. Rather, be *filled* with the Holy Spirit instead...

This whole idea of being "filled" is perhaps best illustrated by the following story:

A professor once stood in front of his religion class with some items spread out on the table in front of him. When the class began, he picked up a very large and empty mayonnaise jar and proceeded to fill it with golf balls. He then asked the students if the jar was filled, and they replied that it was.

The professor then picked up a box of pebbles and poured *them* into the jar. He shook the jar lightly allowing the pebbles to roll into the open areas *between* the golf balls. He then asked the students, once again, if the jar was full. They agreed it was.

The professor next picked up a small bucket of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else, all the remaining spaces and crevices. He once more asked if the jar was full. And the students responded with an emphatic "Yes."

The professor then produced two glasses of wine from under the table and poured the entire contents of both glasses into the jar, effectively filling the final, minute, empty spaces between the grains of sand. The students laughed.

"Now," said the professor, as the laughter subsided. "I want you to consider that this jar represents your life. The golf balls are all the important things: Your family, your children, your health, your friends,

all the things you're passionate about and, last but not least, your *faith*; and all the things you do to live out your faith each and every day. These are the things that, if everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full.

“Now the pebbles are the other things that matter. Your job, your house, your car. The material things that, if you lost *them*, they could be replaced. Or you could learn to live without them.

“Finally, the sand is everything else. In other words, the small stuff.

“But consider this,” he continued. “If you put the sand into the jar *first*, there will be no room for the pebbles or the golf balls. In other words, if you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have enough room – you will never have enough *time* – for the things that are important to you; the things that *really* matter.

“So pay attention to the things that are critical to your life and your happiness. Play with your children. Take time to go get medical checkups. Take your spouse out to dinner. Play another 18 holes with your golf buddies. Most of all, make the time to go to church and feed your faith. Find the time to volunteer and use your talents to serve and help others.

“There will *always* be time to clean the house and fix the garbage disposal. Take care of the golf balls *first*, the things that *really* matter. Set your priorities. The rest is just sand.”

Or as the old saying goes, “Don't sweat the small stuff.” Quickly followed by, “It's *all* small stuff.”

Today's reading from Ephesians concludes with the words, "...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."

In other words, don't neglect your faith; don't shortchange that spiritual component in your life; don't forget to make time to love and serve God by loving and serving others. Again, be careful how you live. Be wise. Make the most of your time. Most of all, strive to understand the will of the Lord and then strive to live it out in your daily lives...

It is said that Tchaikovsky, the great Russian composer, put a sign out on his gate that read, "Visiting hours Monday and Tuesday between 3:00 and 5:00 pm. Other times, please do not ring."

By posting that sign, Tchaikovsky was announcing that his time was important; valuable to him. If he was going to achieve his purpose and bless the world with his music, he needed to single-mindedly devote himself to that task. He was not willing to compromise his work, or his calling, by wasting his time with trivial matters. He knew that, in order to reach his goal, he needed to focus on his purpose; he needed to value his time, and he needed to teach others to do the same.

As a result of this willingness and determination to value and protect his daily schedule, Tchaikovsky became arguably the foremost musical composer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, had he allowed himself to be distracted by other – less important – things, the world would have been deprived of his beautiful music.



And so it is with us as Christians as well. If we are to fulfill our *own* calling, our baptismal calling; if we are to devote ourselves to growing day by day in the faith; if we are to seek – as Rick Warren famously said – a purpose-driven life; then we need to similarly value our own time; we need to be careful how we live; we need to understand the will of God for our lives and then strive to live it out...

Going back to that professor and his mayonnaise jar... Afterwards, one of the students raised her hand and inquired what the *wine* represented. Remember, the golf balls were the really important things in life; the things you couldn't live without. The pebbles were some of the other important things in life; but they were the things you *could* live without, if you had to. And the sand was everything else; the small stuff.

But then he also poured a couple of glasses of wine into the jar as well, didn't he? What does the wine represent this student wanted to know.

The professor smiled. "I'm glad you asked that question," he said. "It just goes to show you that there's always room for a couple of glasses of wine with a friend."

Our reading this morning warned, "Do not get drunk with wine." But wisdom, as I pointed out earlier is knowing *when* to do something, and when *not* to do it." Getting drunk with wine is not a good thing, for sure. Especially if it keeps you from the really *important* things in life.

But sharing a glass of wine, at the end of the day, after all those important things in life are addressed and taken care of? That's probably not a bad thing at all. Amen.

