

LIVING WISELY

Proverbs 9:1-6; Ephesians 5:15-20

As young Presbyterians, I would wager that many of you had to learn the Catechism as a Confirmand or candidate for baptism. The very first question: what is the chief end of man? And the answer: to love God and enjoy him forever. This question can help us to understand today's scripture readings. Both Proverbs and Ephesians encourage the listener to Live Wisely! Not wasting our time in this life. Ephesians goes further and urges followers of Jesus Christ to live lives of joy. So, today I ask you: What in your life gives you JOY?

I am saddened to say that on most Sunday mornings if someone from another planet entered into the sanctuary of most churches, they would immediately jump to the conclusion that sadness is the primary emotion of those present. When I look out on the faces of people in the congregations I have served, I cannot tell if we are in a funeral service or in a courtroom where people are being sentenced to prison.

As we sang the opening hymn this morning I was struck by the irony of the words being sung – Joyful, Joyful we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love. Hearts unfold like flowers before thee, opening to the sun above – and the expressions on each face. There was a real disconnect between the furrowed brows and pained looks and the words being sung. To quote a church-musician friend of mine, "While the lips sing, the heart must join in the melody by an uplifting to God. Too much singing in the churches is only of the lips." In other words, your faces do not reflect the joy of which we sing.

A friend shared with me the story of his experience in a Television communication class. The instructor had spent had great deal of time talking to the class about the importance of facial expressions while delivering their news reports. On this day each student was given a news script and asked to deliver it while being filmed. He could barely contain his laughter as he told of a female classmate who smiled widely, showing all her pearly white teeth as she said, "And last evening the entire country of Thailand was destroyed by a typhoon. Early reports indicate thousands of casualties." The whole class laughed uncontrollably as the instructor tried to regain composure enough to offer criticism. Ultimately the instructor simply said, "That is the best example of doing everything wrong!"

Our lives are reflections of what we believe. If we believe in God, Creator of all that is, in Jesus the Christ, our Redeemer and Brother, and in the Holy Spirit, who is with us in all times and places, sustaining us and filling us with the power that comes from God, then our lives and our actions need to reflect it. Instead, too often people who claim a faith and belief in God, Son, and Spirit, resort to "self-medication" as attempts to blot out the unpleasant realities of life. But the writer of this Letter to the Church at Ephesus prohibits escape into alcohol. The problem is that the drunkard or other addict not only is useless to the cause, but also misses real ecstasy, the kind that empowers Christlike action for the good of the world, being "filled with the Spirit." This is not a letter addressing temperance, but rather this letter wants us to seek the Spirit and experience the power of the Holy Spirit. The writer of this letter wants all who claim Jesus as Lord of our lives to live lives of thanksgiving and praise giving.

Truly, not all Christians are comfortable with the mention of ecstasy, but in this text we are confronted with it. This text is looking to the transforming effects of hearts that sing. When our hearts sing - the result of ecstasy that comes from the Holy Spirit - we are useful in transforming the

world. This text asks us to open our experience to the Spirit with the goal of shaping our attitudes. Attitudes shape who we are, how we respond, and how others see us.

I am a cancer survivor. I have been "cancer free" for 10 years. While dealing with the disease that threatened my life, I refused to allow the cancer to have any power over my life. Though there were times when I was unsure that I could put one foot before the other, I never missed a Sunday preaching in both my churches. I named my gastrointestinal tumor Tony, because I had a "tiger by the tail and we were going to whip that thing!" At some point during my treatment, my doctor at WFU BMC cancer center introduced me to one of his residents and said, "This is Rev. Hemrick and she is a perfect example of what attitude can do in the battle against cancer."

In all things I gave God thanks and praise. I now thank God for the cancer - not because I think that God gave me the cancer, but because cancer taught me how to receive from others. Cancer taught me to slow down long enough to see all the blessings that surround me. Cancer taught me that in every time and place, when things are good and when the road is rough, God is worthy of my praise. Cancer taught me to hear the birds sing, enjoy sunrises and sunsets, and find joy in the Holy Spirit that makes my heart sing. Cancer allowed me to be intoxicated - overflowing in the ecstasy that comes only through the presence of the Holy Spirit working in my life. I have an attitude of gratitude - for cancer.

The mark of the wise, according to this passage, is using time wisely, and using your time to change the world. This passage gives meaning to the phrase, "seize the day" for a day that is wasted is gone and we cannot get it back. And further, a day spent in sadness and/or worry, is wasted, for we can control nothing and everything is under God's control. "Because the days are evil" shifts the purpose of seizing the day from our own personal use to Christ's purpose. The way of wisdom is a life filled by the Holy Spirit, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, serving in the strength the Spirit provides, adopting the attitudes inspired by the Spirit, attitudes of joy and gratitude and humility and respect.

These verses continue instructions regarding the Christian life. This life is the result of the reconciliation that God has brought about in Christ. Through this life, rooted in the Holy Spirit, we experience true joy.

Merriam-Webster defines joy in this way: *a feeling of great happiness : a source or cause of great happiness : something or someone that gives **joy** to someone : success in doing, finding, or getting ...*

Paul Thigpen shares this story: I remember coming home one afternoon to discover that the kitchen I had worked so hard to clean earlier that day was now a terrible wreck. My young daughter had obviously been busy "cooking" and all the ingredients, pots and pans, and bowls were strewn across the counters and floors. In the midst of this chaos, I spotted a scrap of paper with a clumsily written note that read, "I'm makin su thin 4 you, Dad, and it was signed, "Your Angel". In the midst of that disarray and despite my irritation, joy suddenly sprang up in my heart, sweet and pure. My attention was shifted from the problem to the little girl I love. As I encountered her in that brief note, I delighted in her. With her simple goodness in focus, I could take pleasure in seeing her hand at work in a situation that seemed otherwise disastrous. The same is true of our joy in the Lord. Many times life can be messy, we can't find much to be happy about. Nevertheless, if we look hard enough, we can usually see the Lord behind it all, or at least working through it all, "makin sum thin" for us.

This business of paying attention, of paying close attention, of keeping on paying attention to the important things, even of turning away from the distractions of the world to do so--this is not dismal work. The Christians in Ephesus were not to be dismal people. Markus Barth reminds us that "early Christian congregations were singing, jubilant, exulting assemblies"--like modern-day congregations in parts of Africa. My friend Gerald Stephens writes me from the Congo that he has "never seen so much unmitigated joy during worship." Gerald goes on:

"I've been in evangelical churches where folks were well-trained to 'act' joyous...But here, it's no act. It's not Pentecostal ecstasy either, but a kind of reasoned joy. And, probably the most joyous times are the offering times--the singing reaches its loudest, the dancing and clapping is at its most unbridled. Usually, there are at least two offerings per worship service--one for the parish, the other for the poor.

"Worshippers come forward dancing and singing to put their money into a box at the front of the worship place. I most enjoy," Gerald said, "watching the older men dance to the front, chuck their money in the box, and then dance back to their places. They're dressed to the nines and do a kind of understated two-step while holding their arms outward and bent at the elbows--think of rendering one's head, shoulders, and arms into a kind of "W." Somehow their hips take on a life apart, swiveling, swaying. Can you imagine in one of our churches in the United States, where the clerk of session or the chair of the finance committee would come forward with his or her offering like this? It's great stuff! It's especially great because it's so extraordinarily sincere, in no way contrived."

But as great as this stuff is, it does not take in the whole of the counsel of the writer of the letter to the Ephesians, for he is not talking only about worship or even about worship first. He is talking about life.

The Christian life may require paying attention, but it is not a dismal paint-by-the-numbers sort of life. The Christian life is not a dismal task at all. It is no more grinding work than fourth grade was, ending as it did with a picnic in the forgiving Mrs. Kessler's backyard, walking as a class from the school to her house, two-by-two, in straight lines, no doubt, and finding ourselves, all of a sudden, in an English garden, where we ate and ran and played and sang and danced and felt our hearts fill with the music.

Stop. Pay attention. Not to the world. Do not listen to the world. Listen to the word of the Lord: "Sing and make melody--make music--to the Lord in your hearts, always giving thanks...for everything, always giving thanks, giving thanks for everything," in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.