

The Spiritual Solution

Ephesians 5:15-20

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Last Sunday was the closing night of Outside Lands, a 3-day music festival in Golden Gate Park that drew a crowd of over 70,000 people. I watched it from the comfort of my own home on a live-stream website. In the middle of final song of the festival, the head-liner, Elton John, stopped all the singing and music from the stage and the mass of people all sang together the chorus, “Na, nana na-na na...” Sir Elton John stood on stage, his hands raised, elated, as a song he wrote in 1972 was reflected back to him, being sung by crowds of all ages, including teen-agers and twenty-somethings. It was an amazing moment to behold, the sense of unity of the crowd, singing together with such joy and exhilaration.

I’m guessing that this must be a bit what it could be like for God when we sing together each Sunday, all the churches, all across the world. When we come together in unity and in adoration of God and the miraculous works God has done throughout the ages. Singing praises that God has sustained us through another day, another summer, another year. There is something about singing together that unites and bonds us in a profound way. When we sing together in church, it has the potential to truly transport and transform us because we are intentionally being filled up with the Holy Spirit, a clearing, cleansing power that heightens our consciousness and connects us with God and one another. Aren’t we so fortunate to have this time together on Sundays? Truly, it is one of the things that I look forward to when I wake up on Sunday mornings – I have such excitement about the opportunity to sing together. There are not too many other occasions in our day-to-day lives, and I am grateful that church experience provides this.

Today is the 5th week of our 6-week Ephesians series. As a recap: Ephesians was a letter of encouragement likely written by Paul or a follower of Paul to the early churches of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) in the latter 1st century. Over the last month, we have heard in Ephesians that the good news of the gospel is for all people; that the church will be strengthened with power from the Holy Spirit, rooted and grounded in Christ’s love, and filled with God’s fullness; that the community of believers is Christ’s body; and that it is meant to fully embrace this body in a way that imitates God – being unified in love through speaking and acting in ways that build up and offer grace.

Today, the writer continues this letter with the encouragement to live a Spirit-filled life. Be careful how you live, it says, be wise and make the most of the time. Make the most of the time. Well, we surely try to do this, don’t we? Make the most of the time? The writer of Ephesians says this because, likely, from the way things are

looking, people aren't making the most of the time, and the days are evil, it says. I consider this phrase, "the days are evil," to mean the constant temptations in the world that entice us away from God. There is urgency in the passage because of the pervasiveness of the things we are drawn to that do not serve us or our community; we must hold high standards and act wisely today, or there are consequences, just as in Paul's time in the 1st century. One commentator notes that she interprets this saying, "the days are evil," to mean that day upon day upon day can be evil if we don't redeem the time. Sameness, boredom, work, heaviness, laboriousness. We redeem the time by filling it. The question is, do we fill it with things that give life to us and the people around us?

Last year, for 5th year in a row, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute ranked Marin the healthiest of the 56 ranked counties in the state of California. The criteria to determine health included lowest premature death rate, lowest in adult obesity, lowest teen birth rate, lowest percent of uninsured adults, lowest percent unemployment, lowest percent of children in poverty, lowest violent crime rate, highest in physical activity and highest high school graduation rate. Marin ranked #1 in California overall.

Interestingly, though, Marin also has the highest binge-drinking rate in the state and one of the highest in the nation, for all age groups. Binge drinking can be defined as 5 or more drinks for men and 4 or more drinks for women on one occasion. Let's not beat around the bush. The Ephesians passage read today says that drunkenness is debauchery. The Greek word for debauchery, *asotia*, comes from the root word *sozo*, meaning to heal, rescue, save, deliver out of danger and into safety. The "a" at the beginning of the word *asotia* puts it in the negative, meaning "no" or "without;" literally: "what can't be saved." Strong's Concordance defines *asotia* or debauchery as "Spiritual wastefulness due to excessive behavior." We tend to be excessive here in Marin, don't we? Excessive not just in our drinking, but in other forms of self-absorption and self-indulgence as well. I have heard the new nickname for Mill Valley is "Me-Valley." When we engage in self-consuming behaviors, we are running on our own will and thus unable to discern God's will for us. And this is what the passage claims we are to do to be wise and make the most of our time – we are to understand God's will for us.

Let's review the qualities and behaviors Ephesians has promoted up to this reading today – unity, reconciliation, peace, humility, wisdom, patience, honesty, appropriately expressing anger, wholesome and positive communication, kindness, compassion, and forgiveness... these are not necessarily the qualities we portray when heavily intoxicated. Though we may feel, temporarily, that we are more connected while inebriated, it is a false pretense; in actuality, drunkenness is self-centered behavior that separates us from one another. The alternative that the Ephesians writer names is filling ourselves with a different spirit – not that of alcohol, but that which does heal, rescue and save, the Holy Spirit. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, Ephesians says, we sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs together.

John Arterton writes on the American Choral Directors website that “music has special powers. It can move us, comfort us, energize us, inspire us, heal us. It can transport us away to places beyond the realities of everyday life. It can get into our wiring and stir up a variety of memories and emotions within us. It can change our mood and make us glad to be alive. (Kind of like drinking, but without the hangover!) There’s something wonderful about the kind of inclusion and sense of community that a church chorus creates, he says, a feeling that ‘we’re all in this together.’ At church, we are not required to be technically-perfect professional singers who have auditioned for the part, which is a plus, he says, because there are no out-of-control egos in competition with one another; in this way, a church chorus is much more fun. There is no such thing as a mistake when singing in church. We are merely offering our hearts to God in the present moment. The deep breathing and the concentration on things other than our daily problems while singing help us to feel less stressed and more relaxed. Walls are broken down. Fears conquered. Hearts opened. Yes, singing is indeed a spiritual practice,” Arterton says.

Scientific studies have proved that singing is indeed good for our health, as I noted in the Redwoods LOG this Spring, which you may recall: Singing releases endorphins, which inhibit pain and produce a feeling of euphoria; singing releases oxytocin, which is a natural stress reliever that alleviates feelings of depression and loneliness and lowers blood pressure and heart rates; and as a result of being less stressed, singing will help you sleep better; singing increases lung capacity and improves posture; singing increases mental alertness through greater oxygenation; singing boosts immunity by promoting healthy lymphatic system; singing clears respiratory tubes and sinuses, and, finally, but certainly not exhaustively, when people sing together, they feel increased sense of community and belonging.

Imagine how high the health rankings of Marin would really soar if we replaced excessive drinking with singing! Plus, no negative consequences – no blackouts, no bar-fights, no DUIs! The Holy Spirit gives a joy that is real and lasting. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, when our hearts are singing praise to the Lord, we are living in God’s will, which, looping back to the beginning of the passage, is being wise.

I’d like to ask each of you now to point to yourself. Look around. We tend to identify ourselves with our hearts, not our heads. (Is there anyone who pointed to the head?) Interestingly, we think of wisdom as using our head, but our passage today states that to be wise, we are to use our hearts.

Psychologist Wayne Dyer says that “Thinking is the source of our problems, and our heart holds the answer to solving them.” The Greek word for heart, *kardia*, is defined in Strong’s concordance as the affective center of our being, the capacity of moral preference, the desire-producer that makes us tick and establishes who we really are. Heart, or *kardia*, is mentioned over 800 times in Scripture, yet never

refers to the literal physical pump that drives the blood. Heart is used only figuratively in both the Old and New Testaments.

Dyer's claim is that there is nothing wrong with God's creation; mystery and suffering only exist in the mind. It is in the spiritual world, in our hearts, that we find the solutions to our problems. Marin is also known as the "least-churched" county in America. Perhaps we are looking too much to a bottle and to little to God. It is through recognition that God's wisdom is available to us at all times, realization of the personal relationship and experience with God's presence, and reverence communing with God that we are led to a solution to our needs and desires. It is summed up in Jesus' statement in John 14:20: "One day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you." When we commune with God in search for guidance, it is like a drop of water separated from its source that rejoins the ocean that has omnipotent power. Communing with God is a practice. That is why we don't come to church just once. We come each week to be reminded whom and whose we are, and thus we are able to develop and grow in our spiritual practice.

Let us now wisely make the most of the time by singing together hymn 694, *Great God of Every Blessing*.