

Making Good Use of Every Opportunity

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
August 19, 2018

- Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus said, “Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age.”
- Ephesians 5:15-20 ¹⁵So be careful how you live. Don't live like ignorant people, but like wise people. ¹⁶Make good use of every opportunity you have, because these are evil days. ¹⁷Don't be fools, then, but try to find out what the Lord wants you to do. ¹⁸Do not get drunk with wine, which will only ruin you; instead, be filled with the Spirit. ¹⁹Speak to one another with the words of psalms, hymns, and sacred songs; sing hymns and psalms to the Lord with praise in your hearts. ²⁰In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, always give thanks for everything to God the Father.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Paul urges us to “make good use of every opportunity” we have to share the Good News of God’s love revealed in Jesus the Son.

The verse from Ephesians Chapter 5 that you might want me to address is verse 18 in which St. Paul wrote, “Do not get drunk with wine, which will only ruin you; instead, be filled with the Spirit.” If I were to address that verse, I would point out that Paul was not condemning the drinking of wine. Wine was to the ancients what tap water is to us – it was the common beverage consumed every day. “Often [wine] was diluted with water, a practice which some experts have suggested helped disinfect the water from the diseases it was prone to in antiquity.”¹

So Paul the apostle wasn’t condemning the drinking of wine; he was advising against excessive consumption to the point of intoxication. Drunk people can do foolish things and can reflect badly on the reputation of all followers of Jesus. So Paul’s message was “don’t get drunk,” not “don’t drink wine.” And actually he used a little play on words here. Wine and other intoxicating beverages are often referred to as “spirits,” so in effect Paul was saying, “Don’t overfill yourself with spirits, but be filled by the Spirit... of God.”

But that’s not the verse I’m going to address today.

We’re a nice group of people. We all know lots of people. There’s room for more people here this morning. So why aren’t more of the people we know here with us? Is there anything each of us can do about that?

That was the situation that Paul was addressing in this portion of his letter to the new Christians in Ephesus. Ephesus was a bustling seaport on the coast of what is known now as the nation of Turkey. “According to some sources, Ephesus was at the time second only to Rome as a cosmopolitan center of culture and commerce.”² You might find that hard to believe today because the ruins of the ancient seaport are six miles inland from the Aegean Sea! About 500 years ago an earthquake significantly changed the topography of the region and shoreline, leaving Ephesus high and dry.³

In Paul’s day, about thirty years after the first Easter, the population of Ephesus was diverse, sophisticated and engaged. Ephesus was known for an enormous temple to a popular regional deity called Artemis – some suggest that the temple may have been as much as four times the size of the iconic

¹ Miriam Feinberg Vamosh, Daily Life at the Time of Jesus. Herzlia, Israel: Palphot Ltd., © no earlier than 1999, p. 60

² <https://www.history.com/topics/ephesus>, accessed 8/15/2018.

³ http://www.ephesus.us/ephesus/ephesus_location.htm, accessed 8/15/2018

Parthenon atop the Acropolis in Athens.⁴ Artemis was revered by the Ephesians as “the goddess of hunt, chastity, childbirth, wild animals and the wilderness.”⁵ (That’s quite a diverse portfolio, but I suppose goddesses can do whatever they want.)

On one of his missionary journeys Paul settled in Ephesus and spoke about Jesus for three months to the Jewish people in the synagogue, with only some success. In fact, some in his Jewish audience heckled him and bad-mouthed all followers of that man Jesus of Nazareth.⁶ Paul moved his talks to a local lecture hall where for two years he spoke convincingly about the supremacy of Jesus over even the popular local deity Artemis. Paul won many converts to the Christian Life from pagans, from devotees of Artemis, and even among some more of the Jewish people.

It was to those folks that Paul wrote what we now call the Letter to the Ephesians. He wrote it sometime after he had sailed across the Aegean Sea to the Greek province of Macedonia. Writing a letter and having it delivered was no simple task back then, so one had to have a compelling reason to do so. In his Letter to the Ephesians Paul wanted to continue guiding the new Christians in how to live out their faith in their Risen Lord Jesus. He counseled them that their trust in God, their hope for today and for eternity, their concern and compassion for fellow Christians and for all people should be readily apparent by their manner of life. They should share their faith by the words they use, the priorities they choose, the way their actions embody what they believe.

So the verses I want us to focus on today are verses 15-16 where Paul wrote: “¹⁵ So be careful how you live. Don’t live like ignorant people, but like wise people. ¹⁶ Make good use of every opportunity you have, because these are evil days.”⁷ Let’s start at the end of the verse. What did Paul mean by the expression “...these are evil days”? From what I could find, that simply was Paul’s way of referring to the environment surrounding the new Christians. The political and cultural climate of Ephesus was resistant to the Good News of Jesus. The Ephesian community as a whole was more invested in their claim to fame as the home of the magnificent temple to the goddess Artemis. Having the temple there was good for business, bringing pilgrims and the curious to visit Ephesus.

Acts Chapter 19 tells a story about a flourishing industry in Ephesus creating souvenir models of the Temple of Artemis out of silver. One silversmith named Demetrius organized a public demonstration involving fellow artisans. They protested that all the talk about Jesus by Paul and his people threatened the livelihood of the silversmiths, the peace and order of Ephesus, and the reputation of the goddess Artemis. They riled up the whole city. Two of Paul’s associates were seized and taken to the enormous public theatre where a mob had assembled thinking there would be some sort of trial. The book of Acts says that the crowd was shouting this and that, but most people had no idea what the commotion was about or how it started. It was only the brave, cool-headed action of the city clerk that calmed the crowd and got them to disperse. Neither Paul nor any other Christians were persecuted in Ephesus... at least not at that time.

But that incident from Acts Chapter 19 captured the environment the new Christians of Ephesus found themselves living in – an atmosphere not very receptive to the Good News of God’s love in Jesus Christ, Good News that gave the Christians hope and guided their lives. That disinterest or even hostility facing Christians in Ephesus was what Paul meant by “evil days.” That’s why he advised, “So be careful how you live. Don’t live like ignorant people, but like wise people.”⁸

So how were they to go about sharing the Good News then? They probably shouldn’t stage a pig roast at the local synagogue or sell t-shirts on the steps of the Artemis Temple that read, “My God created the stone you used to make your goddess’ temple.” Those would be examples of what Paul meant as being ignorant, not wise.

Instead, aware that disinterest or hostility toward Christianity was characteristic of their surroundings, Paul urged the Ephesians to “make good use of every opportunity you have....”⁹

⁴ <https://www.history.com/topics/ephesus>, accessed 8/15/2018.

⁵ <https://www.history.com/topics/ephesus>, accessed 8/15/2018.

⁶ See Acts 19:9

⁷ Ephesians 5:15-16 Good News Translation

⁸ Ephesians 5:15 Good News Translation

⁹ Ephesians 5:16a Good News Translation

What might those opportunities be for them to share with others the trust they have in God because of the love Jesus said and showed and shared? We can imagine Christians in Ephesus and elsewhere back then

- Consoling a neighbor on the death of their child;
- Taking in the beauty of a sun setting over the Aegean Sea perhaps;
- Chatting with a friend while shopping at the agora, the open-air market;
- Helping a friend rebuild his house after a fire;
- Conversation during a long, hot journey along a dusty road;
- Encouraging a friend overcome by disappointment.

Perhaps Paul had in mind everyday opportunities like those when Christians could share with someone why their faith in God through Jesus guided their life.

And that got me to thinking: in our day, what might those opportunities look like for us?

I think some of the opportunities available to the Ephesians to share their faith with a stranger, neighbor or family member still apply today: chatting while shopping, helping a neighbor, admiring a sunset, consoling a friend.

Settings I can imagine today would have people from this church at the lake, in a park, on a deck, in a pub, enjoying some wine or coffee with friends. You're telling your friend about the inspiration you receive from setting aside time each Sunday for worship to remind you that you are loved and cared for by God, that your life unfolds within God's overarching care.

And I was thinking this week about the many opportunities our church itself provides that you can make use of to share the place your faith has in your life... opportunities like:

- Thursday's Community Meal gives you a chance to invite someone to join you, or at least to tell them about one of the good things that our church is doing.
- We have social occasions coming up like a free picnic following worship on September 9, or a ticketed clambake open to the public on Sunday, October 7.
- When a friend shares how she's struggling to answer her children's questions about God, or death, or violence or meanness, our Sunday school and Adult Education programs can be resources for the kids and their parents.
- Our free Artist Concert Series this year includes a modern dance company, a magician and mentalist, a jazz group, a brass band, plus classical piano and choral and orchestral works – think of people you know who would be interested to come into a church with you for something like that.
- You can share the importance of faith in your life by something as simple as "liking" the Facebook pages of our church and preschool, and the posts about our activities and viewpoints.
- Our annual Trash & Treasure Sale gives you opportunities to invite people to enjoy "the thrill of the hunt" on that first Saturday in October, or you can invite them to join you for a morning or a day of volunteering and fellowship during the week of set-up that precedes the sale.
- And of course, there's a space next to you in the pew where you could invite someone to sit with you, to experience what it can mean to worship God – the peace, the encouragement, the support, the hope, the joy.

I think Paul envisioned a need in his time and in ours – a need for us to "make good use of every opportunity we have" to share with the people we interact with through the week what's meaningful to us about our church and our faith. Paul's instructions to the Ephesians imply that "it is possible to live the full Christian life in the context of 'the world.'"¹⁰ No, the whole world may not be receptive to the message of Christ... but many are. People in your world, in your circle of acquaintance, may be feeling lost, drifting, disillusioned with leaders, angry about the mistreatment of vulnerable people (especially children). People you know may feel lonely, hopeless, longing, defeated, anxious, uncertain. They need the message Jesus has commissioned us to share: In Jesus Christ God assures us that God forgives and accepts and loves you, and invites you to accept and love God in return.

[Sermons: se20180819; © 2018 Jon M. Fancher]

¹⁰ Ralph P. Martin, *Interpretation—a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching: Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1991, 62