

## Stewardship of Time: Planning Our Days to Make the Most of Them

I chose the title of this month's article last spring when I started writing a series on stewardship of all that we are and have. But now it is August, and the title mocks me. Whatever I plan seems destined to be interrupted or derailed by the unanticipated needs of others around me. You see, my kids are home from school; we have friends, relatives and guests visiting every day; special events and outings push normal routines aside; I am left with precious little time alone even to pay the bills, open the mail and compose this essay. Trying to juggle the needs of family, work, church, neighbors, house and garden while still making time for the disciplines that keep me healthy and alert to God is proving especially difficult for me this time of year. I'm only sporadically attending to the things Jesus told all his disciples to do: make disciples, visit the sick and imprisoned, provide hospitality for the foreigner, help widows, orphans and the poor. Doing everything I know I should do seems impossible.

When I think of the advice I've read in time management books, it just makes me cranky. The authors of these books all have wives to take care of their children and households. No wonder they are more in-control of their time than I am of mine. If you are in a caretaking occupation like ministry, you probably know how I feel. Your time is often not your own. You can't control when someone in your congregation gets seriously ill or dies. But when that happens, extra time is required from you regardless of whatever else you might have planned to do. The old adage "Plan your work and work your plan" frustrates the caretakers among us since our days are full of interruptions from the people who depend on us.

How, then, can we be stewards of our time if most of it isn't ours to control? Bill Mullette-Bauer, Oregon-Idaho Conference's new Director of Stewardship and Finance, gave me an insight into this question recently when I confessed to him that I felt woefully inadequate to write about this subject. He told me that a fellow pastor and friend of his came to recognize interruptions as his main business. This reminded me of something I read years ago about God arranging "holy appointments" when we accept that "our" time is really God's time (as is everything else we like to call our own). The idea is that God brings people and situations into our lives that interrupt business-as-usual and propel us toward the real business that God calls us to do. I think the lesson in this for me is to stop resenting such interruptions and start giving thanks for them. After all, they are opportunities for spiritual growth and witness.

Does that mean I get to pitch my to-do list and ignore the family calendar so I can be open to whatever "holy appointments" God might send my way? Probably not. Lists and calendars are my security against an increasingly selective memory. They help me keep track of what others in my family are doing and needing so that I can be supportive of them. But I'm trying to be more flexible and less stressed out about getting everything done. Lately I've been praying, "God, I don't know how to do it all, so please help me know and do what's needed most."

One of the answers to that prayer has been a gradual realization of what I *don't* need to do. Spectating falls into this category. When I honestly seek the Spirit's guidance for how to use my time, I rarely sense the lead to watch TV, sports, shows, or other forms of passive entertainment. Usually I sense that there is more value in turning off all the electronic noise-makers around me and listening quietly for the still, small voice of God. There is more value in doing what I can than in watching and judging what other people do. And there is value in steering clear of the barrage of advertisements that inevitably accompany most modern forms of entertainment. I'm better off without the daily enticement to spend money I don't have on things I don't need.

There's a strong temptation for most of us to flop onto the couch and switch on the tube when we're tired, but doing so comes at a steep price. Not only are we subjected to relentless messages about how we should think, look and behave, we are rendered less present to the people closest to us. Think for a moment about all the ways in which playing a game *with* your family or friends trumps watching the pros play, or about how much more connected you feel with a loved one after having a heart-to-heart talk together than after watching a sitcom side-by-side.

Even watching the news is out for me. "But how do you keep up on what's going on?" a lot of people ask me. I don't. I can't. I've tried, and discovered that it's a mistake to think I know something useful about a subject just because I've caught a snippet about it in the news. One of the truest quips I've ever heard came from Rev. Jim Monroe during a report he made at annual conference a few years ago: "No matter how complicated a situation seems, it's even more complicated than that." What sells as "news" is always over-simplified. Ads and sound bites do more to cloud my thinking than to clarify it, so I try not to let them take up my time or my brain. I'm a better citizen when I know I'm ignorant about a topic, and therefore must seek out the most reliable sources of information about it if I'm called to vote or make some other decision.

In my May article on stewardship of our spirits, I mentioned trying to keep the Sabbath Day holy, restful and renewing. In order to do this, I find I have to abide by the whole fourth Commandment, including the second sentence: "Six days a week you shall labor and do all your work." (Exodus 20: 9, NRSV). Jesus' parables indicate that a typical work day in Biblical times was 12 hours. When I spend about 72 hours a week engaged in a variety of useful endeavors, I usually feel freer to stop working for a full 24 hours than if I've frittered away some of my week in non-productive ways. Work, in the broad sense that I think Moses and Jesus referred to, includes more than just earning a living. It includes all sorts of care-taking, whether paid or unpaid. It includes studying things that matter. It includes healing hurts and building relationships. When I pray about how to best use my time, these are the sorts of things I sense the Spirit calling me to do.

When United Methodist clergy are about to be ordained, they answer a series of historic questions penned by John Wesley. In Wesley's day, these questions used to be asked annually of *all* Methodist preachers, including lay preachers. In his excellent and concise commentary on Wesley's historic questions, retired UM pastor Bob Burtner wrote, "These questions tie us to our past history, but we too are called to a life guided by

disciplines. This is the most basic expression of Methodism.” Among Wesley’s historic questions is this one regarding stewardship of time:

“Will you observe the following direction? Be diligent. Never be unemployed. Never be triflingly employed. Never trifle away time; neither spend any more time at any one place than is strictly necessary. Be punctual. Do everything exactly at the time. And do not mend our rules, but keep them; not for wrath, but for conscience’ sake.”

Obviously, John Wesley had extremely high standards for stewardship of time among the ordained and lay preachers he commissioned for ministry. They were the standards he himself kept. That’s one reason he was such an incredibly prolific, effective writer and preacher. What might God accomplish through us if we really tried to live up to Wesley’s standards for time stewardship, and if we prayed daily for God to direct our use of time – since it’s God’s time, after all?

Blessings,

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