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## Over All Things

Ephesians 5:15-20 15 Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, 16 making the most of the time, because the days are evil. 17 So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, 20 giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As I read and meditated on this passage from Paul this week, two memories kept coming back to me. The first was from a time long ago when I taught for a year on the faculty of a small college in Indiana. At the time, I thought that my life's vocation was to teach philosophy in college but even as I was appointed to this one year position to fill in while the college searched for a permanent faculty member, I knew that I was reconsidering and that God was trying to lure and call me back to ministry. I shared an office that year with a crusty old professor who had been on that school's faculty about 107 years. We were never close at all, but, sharing an office, we did end up talking from time to time about our lives. At one point I told him a thumbnail version of my sense of having been called to ministry as a teenager, my uncertainty about that during my twenties, and my now-growing sense that maybe my life's true vocation was indeed to go back towards ministry. He listened politely, then gave this very bitter-sounding loud sigh and said to me: *"Well, if you're going to go into ministry, pick a denomination where you can make a lot of money at it, and where you can get naive and not-very-bright people to think that it's a holy thing for them to give you lots of money, preferably in cash. After all, everyone expects everyone else to try to fleece each other so you might as well go where the fleecing is going to be good and you can get rich."* I was dumbfounded by his response, not so much for its **content** – after all, every minister and every church member has heard people say that ministers are just in it for the

money, and that the church is just a kind of racket. They've been saying such things since Peter's sermon on Pentecost.

No, what left me sad and what seared this memory into my brain was the absolute and utter lack of any feeling that my colleague had as he said all this. The *words* themselves may seem passionate, but he delivered them with the same tone that he would have if he had been reading the phone book. He had no animation, no spirit, no life, in him. And the result was that he had no joy and exuded an air of defeat and discouragement that was just absolutely flat. I contrast that experience with one a few years later, when I was an Associate Regional Minister in Indiana. One of the churches that was part of my responsibility was the predominantly Puerto Rican church in downtown Gary, Indiana. Talk about a setting that, by rights, you would think might suck the spirit of you! Moreover, this church met on Sundays in huge old building that in its day had been magnificent but which now was falling apart, often vandalized, and in which the church had walled off a small part of the sanctuary for Sunday morning services because much of the rest of the building was dangerous, they couldn't afford to heat it, and they couldn't afford to secure it. The predominantly white church that had fled downtown Gary in the 1960s did this congregation no favor by passing on this building. And the members of this church were some of the poorest of the poor. Many of them worked two jobs, usually at minimum wage or close to it, and many of them lived in places that you wouldn't put your worst enemy. If anyone had reason for being spirit-less, for having a flat and even bitter response to life and to church and to ministry, you would think that it would be these folks.

But when I would go there on Sunday mornings for worship, on the contrary: you can't imagine a more exciting and spirit-filled place. Drums, and guitars, and tambourines were the accompaniment to lively and boisterous singing as folks gathered Sunday by Sunday to worship God. And do you know when the worship service was

the very most Spirit-filled and lively? During the offering. They didn't quietly pass the plates; no, when the offering time came the music cranked into high gear, and folks would start making their way down the center aisle with their morning offering, dancing and singing, hands held high, clapping to the beat. And as they placed their money in the plate, an elder would immediately count it, and then would announce to shouts of joy and praise how much Mr. or Mrs. So-and-So had given this morning. (Can you imagine doing that here!?) And so very often I would see some of those who had the least to give were the most joyful, the loudest in their praise. Singing, shouting, clapping, they came and they gave. It was the high point of their week.

*“Do not get drunk with wine,” Paul says, “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.”* Paul's words here aren't simply just about the dangers of drunkenness. No, he has a larger point in mind, and if we read him simply as wanting to be the Church's Hall Monitor who lays down rules for us about how many beers to have, we will miss what he is trying most of all to tell us, and that is this: ***Pay attention to what fills you with true joy – and then cultivate, follow, revel, and magnify that in your lives.*** *Pay attention.* That in fact is an alternative way of translating his opening lines that the NRSV translates as “be careful.”<sup>1</sup> *Pay attention.* *Pay attention to what fills you, and seek to be filled with God's spirit and seek to be wise about what will truly make you fulfilled and what will truly give you joy.*

You see, the mistake that my faculty colleague had made was that he had paid attention to the *wrong* things and he had let the *wrong* things fill him. He had let an

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<sup>1</sup>I'm indebted to Rev. Rick Dietrich for this point. His sermon's story about African congregations' offering times also helped remind me of my own experience with that Puerto Rican church in Gary. [http://day1.org/502-hey\\_pay\\_attention](http://day1.org/502-hey_pay_attention)

obsession with money drive out everything else. He had let cynicism seduce him. He had let an attitude of “me first” fill him. And what happened is this: even as those things filled him, they also sucked the spirit right out of him. Just as some fire extinguishers work by forcing all the oxygen out of a space, the result of his being filled with *these* things instead of a spirit of wisdom and joy and thanksgiving was to have his spirit entirely sucked out him – leaving his life and his outlook flat and lifeless. Paying attention to the wrong things can do that; they can force out the things that truly give your life joy and vitality and hope.

So what is Paul telling you and me this morning? Three things, I think. First, as I also talked about last week, you and I **simply need to pay attention**. *Just pay attention*. Most of you know that Barbara and I finally sold our house late last spring and I rented myself a small cottage in Manitou. It is an utterly gorgeous drive as you begin to ascend into the foothills and as you wend your way through the narrow and curvy streets that disclose a new vista at each turn. But I realized one day that I had driven all the way from the church to my cottage and not noticed a single thing about the incredible beauty around me because I was so caught up in whatever it was that I was thinking about or daydreaming about or distracted by. I didn't notice the glory that was before my eyes. And so, once again, as we did last week, the first thing I take from Paul's words is that it is utterly crucial for you and I to cultivate the habit, the spiritual discipline, if you will, **of paying attention**. How? Well, one way that has helped me is to commit myself to seeing at least one new thing every day, to notice something as I go about my day that I hadn't noticed before. Maybe you could try that too. For you see, in times of anxiety you and I will crave routine, crave, even, rotteness and sameness. But too much of those things can keep us from seeing what God is trying to do, how God may be trying to fill us with new things, new possibilities, new perspectives. Too much routine may *seem* to adequately fill us in the short run, but in

the long run it can suck the **possibility** out of life and faith and church. The poet Mary Oliver puts it this way in her very short poem, "Instruction for living a life." *"Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."*

The second thing we can take from Paul's words is this and it's really rather simple: **Sing**. Sing to the Lord. **Sing to the Lord**. Paul devotes a big chunk of today's scripture to that admonition; did you hear it: *"as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts."* In other words, whether you're together or you're alone, sing. *Sing*. You don't have to do it with drum sets and guitars and tambourines, but there simply is something life-giving, hope-giving about singing with gusto and with volume! It's harder for fear and worry and anxiety to sneak in and fill you when you are singing. One of the most Spirit-filled, exuberant, joy-filled persons that I know is my oldest friend, Bob. You've heard me talk of him before and he was with us in worship a year ago when I began my educational leave. And he and I will be going our annual shared spiritual retreat and road trip in a couple of weeks. One of the things I learned early on about Bob, more than 45 years ago, is that he sings. Always, he is singing. When we were roommates sharing a house in college, he would take a hymnal in the car and he would sing at traffic lights. I would hear him singing hymns in the shower. He would even, if this isn't TMI, take a hymnal into the bathroom with him! And he is full of joy. Even in circumstances that are scary or sad, hurtful or hateful, worrisome or wearying, he is one who is inhabited by God's hope and God's spirit and I am convinced that it is in part because he follows Paul's simple admonition to sing. **Just sing. Sing to the Lord!**

The third point to take from Paul's words is also simple, but can be oh-so-hard sometimes: **Give thanks**. The way that the NRSV translates Paul's words is this: *"[give] thanks to God... at all times and for everything."* But this is where translations can read us astray. I'm reminded of an old cartoon with a little boy eating his dinner,

parent nearby with head bowed saying grace, and the little boy saying “**But I’m NOT thankful for broccoli!**” Well, neither am I actually. Nor am I thankful **for** freezing rain or traffic jams or days without sunshine or a hundred other of life’s small annoyances. I am not thankful **for** sickness, and accidents, and natural disasters. I am not thankful **for** folks who do evil to other folks, or for folks who commit cowardly acts to terrorize others, or for evil men who turn girls as young as nine years old into sex slaves. I am not thankful **for** any of these things. And that’s why Eugene Petersen’s translation of this crucial little verse makes so much more theological sense, it seems to me. Petersen says that it is better to translate this line not as “give thanks **for** everything”; no, he says that we are called to “give thanks **over** everything.” **Over** everything. That’s a huge difference from a tiny word!

For you see, to give thanks **for** those calamities and evils implies that God is responsible for them, that God has specifically chosen to send evil, hurt, pain, and suffering to some of God’s children. But I just don’t believe that’s true. And thanking God **for** such things runs the risk of implying that God is a bully to be placated, rather than a parent to be loved. And yet I do think that it is right and fitting and true to give thanks **over** everything. Why? Because even in the worst of circumstances, or even simply in times of change and anxiety, we can indeed praise God. We can indeed praise God for always being **present** in every circumstance to bring about the good that is possible, the transformation that is possible, the hope that is possible. That’s what God does, that’s what God has promised us – to be present with us no matter what, guiding us, loving us, leading us through the best and the worst and everything in between that life can offer. So giving thanks **over** all things is precisely to be giving thanks not for those things themselves, but for the God who indeed is **over** all things in hope and in power. Do you hear the difference? It’s crucial. It’s crucial.

So, three things that I believe we can take from Paul’s words this day: Pay

attention; pay attention to what is filling you; pay attention to how routine and rote would keep you from seeing God at work. And sing – it's just harder to be shallow or scared or stuck when you're singing to the Lord! And give thanks **over** all things because no matter what, you know that God is with you in love and power and hope. For this very, very good news: Thanks be to God! Amen.