

CARPE DIEM

MARK 12:41-44; ECCLESIASTES 11:1-6

A good movie from some years back now is entitled “Dead Poets’ Society.” The setting is an elite, stuffy private high school in New England about sixty years ago. One of the main characters is a newly hired English professor, John Keating. He has an unorthodox approach to education that captures the hearts and minds of many of his young students. Keating’s philosophy of life could be summed up in the Latin phrase “Carpe diem” which means “Seize the day.” He wanted his students to attack life as fully as possible, not take it easy, not play it safe, and not wait impassively for life just to happen to them. Life has a way of passing you by if you do that.

Carpe diem. Seize the day. Now when God is left out of that kind of approach to life, human beings usually become self-centered and selfish. But when God is at the center of your life, carpe diem or seize the day is actually the biblical way to live your life. That’s actually one of the essential messages of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes and particularly the passage we want to reflect upon this morning. Now if anyone illustrated what’s being advocated there in Ecclesiastes 11, it’s the story of a poor widow who came to the Jewish temple to worship God one day. People were bringing their bags of silver and gold coins and dropping them into offering boxes at the temple. It was a real show! The more coins you had, the bigger clanking and clinking sounds your offering made as it trickled down the trumpet-shaped throats of those offering receptacles. This woman was the poorest of the poor – a widow. Her meager gift of two copper coins – worth less than a penny - made no actual sound whatsoever, but her gift clanked like a mighty bell in the heart of Jesus. She literally gave everything she had to God as an act of worship and Jesus took notice of it.

Let’s read that story once more this morning. Giving of your time, talent, and treasure to the Lord is the gift of yourself. The widow illustrates that truth. Ecclesiastes teaches that truth. Giving is more than a random, unusual act for a disciple of Jesus. It’s a lifestyle. God isn’t satisfied that we just give. No, God wants us to become giving persons who practice a lifestyle of giving ourselves away. The author of Ecclesiastes, who many scholars believe was King Solomon, the son of King David, had a kind of terse, matter of fact style. But I find in the verses we read a moment ago, four calls to seize the day spiritually. Carpe diem! For instance, the first call is this ...

INSTEAD OF PROTECTING, RELEASE YOURSELF.

We read earlier, “Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.” (Ecc 11:1 NIV) I like how the old Living Bible paraphrase renders these verses, so I’m going to refer to that version of God’s Word several times today. It says, “Give generously, for your gifts will return to you later.” (Ecc 11:1 LB) Here’s one reason Jesus was so impressed with this poor widow. She gave away her last cent. In other words, instead of trying to protect the little she had, she released it and herself to God. That’s Solomon’s point, too. Give yourself away generously in all areas of your life. Figuratively speaking, release yourself “upon the waters.” In other words, let go of your life. Stop trying to protect it. That command is then followed by a promise, “... after

many days you will find it again” or “your gifts will return to you later.” When you release your life to the Lord in terms of giving your time, talent and treasure, there’s something remarkable about God’s faithfulness in bringing back any number of unexpected benefits and blessings.

Our culture gives us very different advice. Protect yourself. Don’t get overextended. Calculate everything out carefully to make sure there’s a benefit to you. Make sure there’s a “payback” before you give anything of yourself. God says, “No, don’t live your life like that. What are you trying to protect? Give yourself away to Me. And when you give yourself away to Me, I will reward you.” The Bible says elsewhere, “The generous will prosper; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed.” (Prov 11:25 NLT) I love that! Think of the many ways you can refresh the life of another person: a word of encouragement, a big hug, a delicious meal lovingly prepared, a caring, listening ear, or a simple offer to pray for his or her needs. I hear God’s Word saying that if that becomes your lifestyle – not just a random act once every decade! - then you can expect to get refreshed by God Himself and by others He sends to you. Yes, life can get very hard and dry for all of us. The person who practices a lifestyle of giving himself or herself away can expect to be given to when he or she needs personal refreshment. God will see to it. Jesus made much the same observation when He said, “Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full—pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back.” (Luke 6:38 NLT)

Every day and every week this church offers you and me the opportunity to give away gifts of our time, talent, and treasure. What’s your response when an opportunity to serve is presented? “Oh, my life is so very busy, busy, busy. I just don’t have the time to give my life away. Oh, my serving days are over. It’s time to let other people do it. Oh, I might not like it once I get started, so it’s better not even to start.” God says, “What are you protecting? Give yourself away to Me and what I want to do through you in this world.” You might say, “Oh, I just can’t afford to tithe to the Lord’s work. Maybe if I get that promotion or I get a better job, I’ll be able to tithe, then. I don’t know if I’ll outlive my income. I need to think about the future.” God says, “What are you protecting? Bring the tithe to Me. Go ahead and put Me to the test. Release the tithe to Me and see if I will not bring blessing into your life.” Elsewhere in God’s Word, we read, “... But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop.” (1 Cor 9:6 NLT) And it was Jesus who said, “If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.” (Lk 9:24 NLT) Don’t protect yourself. Let God protect you. Release yourself to serve God as fully and for as long as you can. Say, “Lord, here are all my talents, my time, and my treasure. It all belongs to You anyway. I give it to You. Use it for Your glory!” Carpe diem. Seize the day! Next...

INSTEAD OF HOARDING, GIVE YOURSELF AWAY.

Solomon says, “Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.” (Ecc 11:2 NIV). The old Living Bible rendition puts the same verse like this, “Divide your gifts among many, for in the days ahead you yourself may

need much help.” (Ecc 11:2 LB) Isn’t that what the poor widow did essentially? If anyone ever had a reason to hoard what little she had, it was that dear woman. But instead, she gave all of it to the Lord. And in giving all of it, she gave all of herself. That’s why her act made such an impact on Jesus. Let the bottom line of your life and mine be generosity – bold, unselfish, and has broadly expressed as possible.

Theories on success and what it means to be successful abound. I found an observation by Henry Ford, the epitome of earthly or worldly success, very interesting. He said, “Success is not rare. It is common. It is a matter of adjusting one’s efforts to overcome obstacles and one’s abilities to give the service needed by others. Most people think of it in terms of getting. Success, however, begins in terms of giving.” Are you a successful person? If God is turning you into a giver, the answer is yes. It’s not just giving in one area, but hoarding in others. We give generously across the board. For example, we don’t just give generously of our time, but refuse to tithe. Nor do we give our tithe and hoard our time and talents. We give generously of time, talent, and treasure. How very unlike the message our culture preaches every day which might be expressed in this old saying, “Get all you can, can all you get, then sit on the can!”

Notice what Solomon says and doesn’t say in that verse. He never says that when you give your life away, that God will protect you from every misfortune and heartache out there. A giving lifestyle doesn’t guard your from every difficulty. There’s no guarantee against bad things and bad times in your life or mine. Solomon says you don’t know what kind of disaster is out there. In fact the Bible is pretty clear that all of us are going to receive bad news sometime in our lives. How should we respond? Will we try and retreat into some protective shell and shut life out? Not at all! While we have no idea what unfortunate event may be around the corner of our lives, we continue to give ourselves away. We leave the results with God. We will see God’s purposes after a while. The Lord promises us that. Instead of hoarding, give yourself away.

Justin Borger tells the story of a homeless woman named Tammy who lived under a bridge in downtown Chattanooga, Tennessee. After providing Tammy with some basic hygiene supplies, he didn’t hear from her for a few weeks—until she called and said that she had been raped. After Borger brought her to the hospital, Tammy started attending Borger’s church. The church started providing vouchers so she could buy food and other items. But that created a problem: Tammy kept giving the vouchers to other people. Borger told her, “Tammy, you need to keep this for yourself. Otherwise you’ll run out of food.” But living under the bridge meant living with other needy people. It was unthinkable for her to receive a gift and then not share it with others. So with an incredulous stare Tammy asked Borger, “Why can’t I give some, too?” Justin Borger had no immediate answer for her very good question. Why shouldn’t Tammy be allowed to give away some of what she’d received? Wasn’t that exactly what he was doing? He paused for a moment and gave her a very pragmatic answer: “But we’re giving this to you, not to everyone else you meet.” But the moment he gave that answer, he knew it had all kinds of holes in it. To only receive and never give back is to be belittled - to be humiliated. He realized he was treating Tammy in a way that God would never treat him. You see, God not only made us able to receive His grace but

also to participate in His own generosity to others. Carpe diem. Seize the day. Now, here's a third thought from Ecclesiastes

INSTEAD OF DRIFTING THROUGH LIFE, PURSUE IT.

Solomon says, "If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie. Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap." (Ecc 11:3-4 NIV) I like how the Living Bible paraphrase interprets the meaning of those verses, "When the clouds are heavy, the rains come down; when a tree falls, whether south or north, the die is cast, for there it lies. If you wait for perfect conditions, you will never get anything done." (Ecc 11:3-4 LB) Most things in this life we can't change and can't control: the weather, taxes, other people's responses and choices, the passing of time, and especially the inevitability of death. If we wait for perfect conditions to get after life and the living of it, we will never do much of anything. Think about that poor widow in the story we read earlier today. If the widow had waited for "perfect conditions" to give her offering to the Lord, would she ever have given it? Of course not. Her life was far from perfect, but she was going to pursue honoring the Lord regardless.

How true when it comes to the giving of our time, talent, and treasure to the Lord and His work in this world! If we wait for perfect conditions, we'll never get anything done! If we claim we're too busy today to be involved in a ministry of some kind, do we honestly think we'll have more time tomorrow? There will never be a perfect time to give your time and talents away. You might be tempted to use your present financial situation as an excuse not to tithe. "Oh, I'll tithe when I get my debts paid off. I'll tithe when I reach my financial goals. I'll tithe when I can afford to do so." No, you won't. There will never be a perfect time to obey the Lord and start tithing. The more we get, the more we want to keep for ourselves. The more we get, the more excuses we manufacture to hold on to what we've got. That's just human nature. Listen to God's Word. If you wait for perfect conditions, you will never get anything done!

Hear that wise man, Solomon, today! What are you doing standing around watching the wind blow? Why worry about which direction the tree falls? You have no control over either. Pursue life and the living of it. Pursue the things you can change, pursue the challenges presented to you the best you can, and then leave the rest of life in the hands of the One who is big enough to handle all the details. Don't wait for an invitation to serve Jesus. Don't wait to be thanked. Don't wait to be appreciated. Don't wait to be reciprocated. Just go for it! Instead of drifting around like an aimless cloud in the sky, pursue this thing called life with God's grace and God's power. Carpe diem. Seize the day. Let me call you attention to a final principle there in Ecclesiastes.

INSTEAD OF DOUBTING GOD, TRUST HIM.

Solomon says, "As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things. Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not

know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.” (Ecc 11:5-6 NIV) The Living Bible paraphrases those same verses in this way. “God’s ways are as mysterious as the pathway of the wind, and as the manner in which a human spirit is infused into the little body of a baby while it is yet in its mother’s womb. Keep on sowing your seed, for you never know which will grow – perhaps it all will.” (Ecc. 11:5-6 LB) We are called to trust God in everything and for everything. Sometimes that calls for living life with real courage. Isn’t the poor widow a fine example of that principle? Is there a greater example of trusting the Lord than letting those two last coins fall from her fingers into the offering box never to be seen again? Is there a greater example of courage?

This is where we decide to leave the “ifs” and “buts” of our doubts behind and launch out on God. You’re a farmer and God allows a flood to wash away your crop, but you just trust Him regardless and give Him praise. You’re a professional business woman and someone throws you a curve ball. God allows your whole career world to be turned upside down, but you just trust Him regardless and give Him praise. You’re a parent who has tried to raise your child to love Jesus and live a life that honors Him, but you see that child make choices that you know are sinful and wrong. You trust Jesus regardless and give Him praise. You visit the doctor and get news that anyone would dread and fear, but you trust God regardless and give Him praise.

Trusting God is sometimes a very hard, very courageous thing to do. But there is much wisdom in taking life as it comes and not wasting time and energy in the deep pit of doubt. God isn’t obligated to explain everything to you and me. In fact, I have found that God often seems to obscure His plan and purpose deliberately in order to see if we will choose to keep on trusting Him. Sometimes we just have to hold on very tightly to the promise in God’s Word that, of course, God has a plan and purpose for every event and circumstance that enters our lives – good or bad, fortunate or unfortunate, happy or very sad. We hold on to the promise that God takes the bad and the good, the failures and the successes, the joys and the disasters and that He is somehow, some way and someday making it all work out for His glory and our good in the end. So, if you really believe that to be true, how do you live it out? You just keep on giving yourself to Jesus every day whether things are good or bad, whether life is filled with gladness or sorrow, and whether your face reveals a smile or some tears. Keep on sowing your seed, for you never know which will grow – perhaps it all will. One day God will bring in the harvest. Carpe diem. Seize the day.

Many of us know the name Chuck Swindoll - a great speaker and Bible teacher. The author of many books. I particularly appreciate one story Chuck tells that started way back in 1958 when he was just a young man. Less than two years after he got married, Chuck joined the Marine Corps. Although the recruiting officer promised Chuck would never have to go overseas, he ended up being posted 8,000 miles from home. What a surprise! Back then, Marines were not allowed to take their families overseas. So Chuck’s wife moved back in with her mom and dad while Chuck headed for Okinawa – another culture, another people, another language, another world.

At first Chuck was offended and angry. He'd been lied to and his life turned upside down! Little did he realize at the time that it was a chance to "sow his seed in the morning." Even before he got to Okinawa, Chuck realized his somewhat sheltered life was going to be severely challenged. His fellow soldiers were mostly single, young men with few moral scruples. He was a Christian. He was married. He wanted to be different and have an impact for Jesus, but quite frankly, he felt pretty intimidated by his new environment. He remembers praying as he dropped his bag on the cement floor of his new home away from home. "Lord, keep me pure. Give me ways to make Christ known. Let me declare it on the front end of this tour of duty so that I won't have to live in the shame of a bad memory, hoping these guys never find out later that I'm a Christian." At the time, Chuck Swindoll had no idea that he'd become a well-known Christian leader. He just wanted to "sow in the morning."

Chuck had a bunk mate named Eddie. He shared his faith with Eddie pretty early on in their relationship, and Eddie made it only too clear he was not in the least bit interested. "I don't want that stuff rammed down my throat, OK? You live your life; I'll live mine. Got it?" Chuck got it. But Eddie was watching Chuck as Chuck got involved in a Scripture memory program, in a prayer ministry, in street meetings, and in a discipleship program. Chuck wanted so much to reach Eddie, but he was at a loss to know how. One day, Chuck had an idea. Maybe Eddie would help him review his Bible memory verses. So he said, "Eddie, I'm going over these Bible verses and I wonder if you'd just help me review them." Eddie said, "Yeah, but don't lay your thing on me, OK? I'll help you with the words, but I ain't interested in being some kind of monk!" Chuck smiled and agreed with the plan. So Chuck and Eddie went over those verses month after month after month. Eddie listened. Eddie corrected. Eddie even encouraged. But Eddie never responded or showed any sign of any spiritual interest – never even once.

Not until 25 years later. Chuck Swindoll's phone rang one day. "Chuck?" "Yeah, who's this?" "This is Eddie, your old bunk buddy in Okinawa." "Eddie! How are ya?" "Hey, listen, man. I've been saved. My wife, too. Thanks for living for Christ. Remember when you used to lay those verses on me?" "Yeah, I remember." "Chuck... it worked." Back in 1958, Chuck sowed some spiritual seeds. In 1984, God brought in the harvest.

Giving yourself away is not supposed to be just a random act. The faithful giving of your time, your talent, and your treasure needs to become a lifestyle. Our culture has a lot of messages that impact us every day. Protect yourself. Hoard what you get. Just do enough to get by in life. Be careful about trusting God or anyone else for that matter. The message of God's Word is just the opposite. Instead of protecting, release yourself. Instead of hoarding, give yourself away. Instead of drifting through life, pursue it. Instead of doubting God, trust Him. Carpe diem, brothers and sisters in Christ, carpe diem. Seize the day!