

GOD'S WORKS OF ART

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Psalm 103:15-18
Ephesians 5:15-20

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Anyone who has ever spent any time at the beach knows that when you introduce kids to sand and water the end result is often a sandcastle. And if not a sandcastle, then perhaps some wildlife form of sand art like a turtle or a snake. Sure, kids like to run in and out of the water, and ride the waves, but they also love to build and create, and sand is a practically perfect medium in their hands – it is basically safe and easy to work with when wet, and if you make a mistake, it's easy to correct or start all over again. Perhaps you've noticed that it's not just children who like to create sand art. It's actually not uncommon to see an adult working on a project long after the kids have lost interest and returned to the water. It's also common these days to see adults without a child in sight, spending hours creating sand masterpieces.

I want to introduce you to a sand artist by the name of Randy Hofman. He's a sand sculptor who primarily creates sand art with religious themes. On the front cover of today's bulletin is one of his many creations. He's also created spectacular works such as "Christ on the Cross," "The resurrected Christ" and "David and Goliath." It's not unusual during the month of August, if you vacation near Ocean City, Maryland, to see his work. He's been doing it for about four decades and considers his sand sculptures a ministry, a way of expressing his faith to others.

For many of us, sand art will mostly be castles on the beach during summer vacations, but for Randy Hofman and others it has become a life-long passion and even a vocation. There are individual and team competitions that can earn people significant amounts of money. But even though such sand sculptures are so much more than the simple sand castles of our summer vacations, when it comes right down to it, they all come to the exact same ending. That's because no matter how big or small, how complex or simple a sand sculpture, it is always temporary.

Why are sand artists so passionate and committed to the mediums of sand and water when the end result is always temporary? It's here today and gone tomorrow, as it is quickly erased by the tide, wind, rain and even little feet. I have to admit that there is a practical side of me that weighs the investment of time and energy, and wants to ask, "Is it worth it?" Is it worth investing so much time and energy into such a temporary creation of art? Obviously, there are those who think differently, and perhaps for them it is the impermanence of sand that is part of the excitement and beauty of their creations.

Even though many of us tend to desire things that last, we also know deep down that life is a lot like a sandcastle before the coming tide. "As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more." (Psalm 103:15-16) Some of us may try to ignore the temporariness of our existence, but the truth can never fully escape us. Whether we recognize it or not, we are made of sand and water – our psalmist actually says "grass, flowers, dust." In other words, our days are numbered. Our time on earth has inherent restrictions. The tide is rising and the wind is blowing.

In recognition of this temporary existence, there are those who choose to throw up their hands. They say it's just not worth the necessary investment of time and

energy to create a beautiful, inspiring life. And yet even though we are but dust or sand, in the hands of our Creator, we are offered the remarkable gift of becoming works of art. I think the Apostle Paul understood well this profound opportunity that we humans have to be defined by something greater than our simple and temporary human existence.

Anyone who has spent much time reading Paul's letters, know that there is an undercurrent of urgency. Paul not only understood, he accepted that his lifespan was limited, and because of that reality he wanted to make the most of what time he had to reveal the power, grace, and beauty of God. Even though we humans have so little time to create something truly beautiful, Paul believe it was possible. As he encouraged first century Christians, he continues to encourage us to become works of art in the hands of God.

Paul specifically says, "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil." (Eph. 5:15-16) In other words, we should be making the most of every opportunity we are given to reveal God's love and grace, to be the presence of Christ, to do something right and good. Because evil is constantly trying to get in our way and is determined to reveal the ugliness of sin in the world and through us whenever possible, we must be careful; we must be wise. We must be determined to bear the beauty that is God – a beauty that has the ability to change the way this world looks – a beauty that is able to use us to multiply God's impact on the world.

So, how do we make the most of our time? How are you specifically using and investing your time? If you're not sure what it means to make the most of your time, Paul is once again helpful. He says, "Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." (Eph. 5:17) In other words, our time is best spent when we are seeking to understand God's will and to fulfill God's purposes not just for our individual lives but also for the community of faith and our society as a whole. This seeking is obviously an active verb; it involves doing and going. To seek God's will always involves the studying of God's Word and making time for prayer; it always includes investing our time in actions that reveal grace and share love. Consider right now what you are doing on a regular basis to understand and live out God's will for your life.

Is there anything else we should be doing to make the most of our time? Once again, Paul tells us by saying, "Do not get drunk with wine... but be filled with the Spirit... 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." (Eph. 5:18-20) In other words, being filled and led by God's Spirit is absolutely essential if our goal is to make the most of our time. How much space is available in your heart and daily life for the power and guidance of God's Spirit? If there's not time in your life for scripture and prayer, for acts of grace and love, there is probably not much room in your life for the Spirit's presence. It is the Spirit that draws us into a more constant state of prayer and communion with God.

Did you notice that Paul connects this emphasis on being filled with the Spirit to the experience of joy? This indwelling presence of the Spirit produces lives that beautifully reflect praise and thanksgiving to God at all times and in all places. Yes, Sunday morning worship is meant to be a joy-filled, beautiful gathering of the community of faith – it is an opportunity for the Spirit's presence in our lives to find expression through communal praise and thanksgiving. But Spirit filled lives cannot possibly be limited to expressions of praise and thanksgiving only one morning a

week. A Spirit filled life finds and creates opportunities for joyous expression every day.

As Christians, this managing of the limited time that God has given us is perhaps our greatest task and challenge in life. But we face this challenge by becoming more aware of God's moment by moment presence in our lives, so that we can then yield ourselves more completely to God's artistic presence. As we are able to embrace God's will for our lives and allow the Spirit room to move in and through our lives, it is then that beautiful, albeit temporary, works of art that glorify God are created.

Yesterday morning, I was sitting in the Lakewood United Methodist church remembering and celebrating the life of Rev. Dr. Richard Parks. As I sat with other robbed clergy in a sanctuary filled with people, I found myself thinking about this message that I would be sharing with you this morning. I admit to feeling a bit concerned that it was not as close to being completed as I would have liked. But mostly I was deeply struck by the fact that Dick's life had been a truly beautiful life. It was a life that ended sooner than many of us had hoped at the age of 77, and yet his was a life that had been yielded to God's will and the movement of God's Spirit. Clearly his life was what Paul describes for us today, and so the impact of his life upon others was profound and far-reaching.

Clearly, part of the beauty and risk of sand art is knowing that sculptures are frail and will fall apart. Part of the beauty as well as risk of our own lives is knowing the same about ourselves. But even though life is fleeting and fragile, the Creator invites each of us to be a part of the only real permanence there is in creation. The beauty of God's artistic creativity is compelling, life-changing, and ultimately eternal. To make the most of time is to place our lives in the hands of the Great Artist realizing that the creating of a beautiful life is not only good for us, it is also really good for those who see and know us.

So, when it comes right down to it, there are basically two choices for sand. It can remain merely sand, stretching endlessly along the shore, flat, formless and undistinguished, or it can yield to the hand of the Great Artist. Could it be that the sameness, the mundaneness of sand is what makes its works of art so stunning? When we human beings make the most of our time by opening ourselves to the will of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit that is when God is able to create the kind of breathtaking art that powerfully reveals His Kingdom.

Are you making the most of your time by yielding your life to God's artistic pleasure? May God's will be done and God's glory revealed through each one of us potential masterpieces gathered here today! Amen.