

**TOO BUSY?**  
Ephesians 5:15-20

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Everything is going great for the Pharaoh in Egypt. His people are getting richer, his land is producing well, and there seems to be no shortage of Hebrew slaves. But then things reach a tipping point. The Hebrew population is growing. The Pharaoh realizes that he won't be able to maintain control if there are more enslaved people than there are oppressors. So he issues an edict. An edict that demonstrates that he sees the slaves as problems, not as people. An edict that makes us shudder in its cruelty, and foreshadows those gut-wrenching scenes that would come thousands of years later on our own soil as families were torn apart, children pulled out of their parents' arms, each member of a family of slaves sold to different owners. The Pharaoh issues an edict that bristles with cruelty and inhumanity. He says, "Every Hebrew baby boy shall be thrown into the River Nile." The Pharaoh thinks he has solved the problem of the Hebrews, but one mother outsmarts him. She saves her baby, who, of course, becomes Moses, who, of course, ends up freeing all of the Hebrew people, leading them out of Egypt, out of slavery, into liberation and towards the Promised Land. This is one of the great stories of God at work through God's people, saving those who are weakest and most vulnerable, protecting the children.

Jesus, who embodies the values and love of God, demonstrates this same compassion. The disciples try to restrict access to Jesus. Maybe it makes them feel important? Maybe they see children the way most people did in those days - as not

deserving of attention. Legally, children were property, just like slaves. The disciples see parents bringing children to Jesus, wanting Jesus to touch and bless them, and the disciples try to keep the parents and children away. But Jesus wants to see the children, not because they're cute, but because Jesus thought everyone was deserving of love and blessing, especially those at the bottom of the ladder, those others had rejected. So Jesus says, "Let the children come to me; the Reign of God is for them as well."

Caring for the youngest among us is sacred work. It is why we pray for parents as we baptize children, and at other times. It is why we offer a preschool as part of our church's outreach to the community, because providing education in a nurturing environment is a natural ministry. It's why we support a Director of Christian Education and a Director of Youth Ministries and all of their volunteers and programs. And it is why we bless teachers and school staff on this day. We lift up their work as a worthy calling. What could be more important for the future of a society than giving children a solid foundation of values and learning?

This time of year evokes a certain kind of dread and anxiety in some families. Some parents are usually glad that school is starting, others are sad to see the more carefree days of summer ending. Some students are worried about new teachers, and about how well they'll do. And then there is the matter of the calendar. Just the very word is enough to put some parents' stomachs into knots. Every group you or your child is involved in is sending out calendars right about now, and the church is no exception. Soccer practices, dance classes, gymnastics tournaments, bandaramas, football games, Confirmation retreats, Scout meetings...thank goodness for electronic

calendars because there wouldn't be a printed one big enough for all of these events to fit. Our commitments can become truly overwhelming.

Can you do it all? Which events take priority? How do you choose?

From our reading today from the book of Ephesians comes these words, "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time..."

How do we make the most of our time in an overscheduled world? Most parents I know feel as if the calendar is their master, and they just dangle limply as if they are puppets on a string. They are pulled from one commitment to another, and just try to breathe in between.

Even when many of those activities are pleasurable, the pace can be exhausting. I talked to a few of our parents of college students as I was preparing this sermon and asked them, "What do you wish you would have done differently when your children were younger?" One of them shares this advice to busy parents: Be aware that you do have choices. It may seem that you don't, but it is up to you to assess which activities are worth the investment of time and money and which aren't. No one knows your child better than you do.

And another shared this: Consider how to make the most of the time you DO have. That time in the car, for example, running from activity to activity. Could you use that time to really talk, or really listen deeply to one another?

In those weeks when you don't make it to church, can you find some time as a family to pray? Around the dinner table? Before bed? Do you pray as your children leave for school in the morning? If so, do you tell them that you do? Can you find ways

to incorporate your relationship with God into your daily lives, so that you as parents feel more spiritually connected and your children learn from seeing that example? How badly do our children need to be reminded of God's presence? We know how much pressure many of them feel...pressure to succeed academically, in sports, to fit in socially...how can you as parents remind them to call on God's strength and help?

I read a book this summer called iKids - Parenting in the Digital Age. I highly recommend it. It's not a book that bemoans the horrors of technology and longs for the good old days. It's a very realistic look at the challenges and the opportunities of parenting in an age of technology, with ideas for how to manage technology in your home, how to set limits, and how to use your child's connection with technology as a way to learn more about your child and connect personally. The book also suggests that parents' ability to manage their own technology use is key.

What about those of us who aren't parents, or those of us whose children are more or less on their own? What can we do to support families, to support schools, to pull children out of those River Nile places of our own times and help bring them to safety?

I've read of one church that has this goal: that by the time each young person in their church is a high school senior, that student will have five adults in their support system, five adults from their church family who know their name, who take an interest in them, who care about them personally. Sometimes these can be formal relationships, like Confirmation mentors, and sometimes it can be as simple as thanking a youth for going on a mission trip or working in the TV room or helping in the nursery, and striking up a conversation.

It might mean offering to babysit occasionally for a neighbor family you know who can't afford a babysitter, so that the parents can go out every now and then. Or bring a batch of cookies. Or just take a moment for a conversation if you see a parent in the neighborhood who looks overwhelmed.

I'm going to be starting a Moms' Group this fall, and I will be looking for some help with babysitting as that group begins. Julie and Nate are looking for volunteers for help in the nursery, in Sunday School, in Confirmation and youth groups. You don't have to be a parent, or a parent with students in a particular age group. Some of the best mentors are those substitute aunts and uncles, those surrogate grandparents, adults who volunteer not because they feel guilty but because they have a heart for children and youth and want to get to know them.

And we can pray for the children of this church, the children of this nation, the children of the world. It is not an insignificant thing to do. None of us is too busy for that.

I'd like to close by sharing with you a true story I just came across on Friday, actually after I'd finished what I thought was the final draft of this sermon. It is too good and too important not to share on this back-to-school Sunday.

There is a fifth grade teacher in Florida, who every Friday afternoon, asks her students to take out a piece of paper and write down the names of four children with whom they'd like to sit the following week. The children know that these requests may or may not be honored. She also asks the students to nominate one student whom they believe has been an exceptional classroom citizen that week. All ballots are privately submitted to her.

And every single Friday afternoon, after the students go home, she takes out those slips of paper, places them in front of her and studies them. She looks for patterns.

Who is not getting requested by anyone else?

Who doesn't even know who to request?

Who never gets noticed enough to be nominated?

Who had a million friends last week and none this week?

You see, this teacher is not looking for a new seating chart or “exceptional citizens.” She is looking for lonely children. She's looking for children who are struggling to connect with other children. She's identifying the little ones who are falling through the cracks of the class's social life. She is discovering whose gifts are going unnoticed by their peers. And she's pinning down- right away- who's being bullied and who is doing the bullying. It's like taking an X-ray of a classroom to see beneath the surface of things and into the hearts of students. It is like mining for gold – the gold being those little ones who need a little help – who need adults to step in and TEACH them how to make friends, how to ask others to play, how to join a group, or how to share their gifts with others. And it's a bully deterrent because every teacher knows that bullying usually happens outside of her eyeshot – and that often kids being bullied are too intimidated to share. But as she said – the truth comes out on those safe, private, little sheets of paper.

How long have she been using this system?

Ever since Columbine, she said. Every single Friday afternoon since Columbine. This brilliant woman watched Columbine knowing that MOST VIOLENCE BEGINS WITH DISCONNECTION. Outward violence can begin as inner loneliness. She

watched that tragedy KNOWING that children who aren't being noticed will eventually resort to being noticed by any means necessary.

And so she decided to start fighting violence early and often, and with the world within her reach. What she is doing when she sits in her empty classroom studying those lists written with shaky 11 year old hands – is SAVING LIVES. I am convinced of it. She is saving lives and altering the trajectory of our world.

Thanks be to God for teachers like that, teaching our children to be brave and kind. Amen.\*

\*The Florida teacher story comes from <http://momastery.com/blog/2014/01/30/share-schools/>