

“Saying No to Say Yes: Toward Good Use of God’s Gift of Time”

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- BC *The Book of Concord*. Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.
- ELCA Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- LC *Large Catechism*
- LW *Luther's Works*. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. 56 vols. St. Louis and Philadelphia, 1955-1986.
- NRSV New Revised Standard Version

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Life is a gift of God. Life exists within and is, in part, measured by time. At times, I have struggled to use well the gift of time.¹ That means also that I have struggled to use well God's gift of life. In this paper, I will explore the development of practices related to the use of time that will positively influence my formation as a missional pastor.

In what follows, I will:

- Provide a historical background to my use of time;
- Explore issues of balance in life as a pastor;
- Examine specific issues related to the use of time, time management, and procrastination; and
- Identify practices that will help me to use time well as I continue to be formed as a missional pastor.

The seminar for which this paper is being written is part of an “inward journey to discover what God is doing through you.”² For me, part of that inward journey focuses on how my use of time frees me to participate more fully in what God wants to do through me.

¹ The lateness of this paper may be a case study in my struggle to use time well!

² Craig Van Gelder, CL7512 Seminar Discussion (St. Paul: Luther Seminary, January 17, 2003).

CHAPTER 2

A PERSONAL HISTORY OF THE USE OF TIME

My history of the use of time includes times when I have used time well and times when I have used time poorly.

Habits that led to a poor use of time developed as I was growing up. Schoolwork came easily to me, and I was often able to get good grades with a minimal amount of work. In my high school years, I was involved in many and varied extracurricular activities, and I would frequently put off completing my homework until late in the evening. When papers were assigned, I would do the necessary research in a timely manner, but would delay the writing until the last minute. One of my rationalizations for that was that I disliked having to type and retype a paper; I only wanted to type it once.

My first semester of college provided a wake-up call to change my ways. I began the semester with study habits similar to those I had used in high school, but the shock of mid-semester grades unlike any I had ever received alerted me to the reality that my study habits were inadequate. For the rest of the semester I focused on developing better study habits and used time extremely well, resulting in the best grades of any semester in college. After the semester ended, I reflected on what had happened, and decided that I wanted to find a balance between the intensity with which I studied in the second half of the semester and the poor study habits I had used in the first half. As a whole, I used time well through the remainder of my college years and through seminary.

For most of my first twenty years as a pastor I continued to use time well. Procrastination was sometimes an issue, especially in working on sermons. In my first parish, a rural two-point one in northern Idaho, I realized during my first Lent that I needed to set aside a day as my day off. Until Lent I had been flexible in taking time off as opportunities arose, but the demands of Lent helped me to see the need for a designated day off. I chose Friday as that day, and have continued that practice for most of my years as a pastor. However, after I had been a pastor for about ten years, and my second child was in school, I decided to take Saturday off instead. My biggest concern in doing so had to do with procrastination: Would I be able to finish my sermon on Friday? Somewhat surprisingly, I was able to do so, and enjoyed Saturdays off with my family until moving to another congregation that had a Saturday worship service.

During those first twenty years as a pastor, I found that I was able to be at my best in the use of time when I was the busiest. I think of a couple of years in particular, when I was teaching three classes a week of *Crossways*, a Bible study program, and serving as secretary of the Constitution Committee of the transition team working on the formation of our new synod during the process of merger into the ELCA. I also think of the first few years when I was the senior pastor of a large congregation in our synod. During those years I helped to lead a capital funds campaign, a major building renovation, and a significant long-range planning process. I worked long hours, and generally used time well.

Toward the end of my first twenty years as a pastor, I began a decline into being overwhelmed, and I struggled to use time well, especially in my work as a pastor. My

wife, who had begun to work outside the home when our younger child entered school, was working nearly full-time. When she began a part-time graduate program, I needed to take on additional responsibilities at home. Trying to balance my responsibilities as a pastor and at home became an increasing challenge. Things went downhill from there. In early 1995, the associate pastor left under less than ideal circumstances. Later in that same year, my wife was hospitalized with a serious mental illness. Though she needed to drop out of the graduate program, she was, a few months later, able to return to full-time work in a different and less stressful job. My responsibilities at home continued, however, as she continued to be significantly affected by her illness. By the fall of 1996, I began to struggle more seriously with how I could balance all of my responsibilities. Though by then I had the pleasure of working with a new partner in pastoral ministry, a combination of life at home, a series of tragic deaths in the congregation, and how I handled it all, ultimately led to a divorce and to the end of my ministry in that congregation. Through my last years in that congregation, I was, among other things, slipping into a poor use of time in my work. In part, it was hard to concentrate on the work at hand, and I felt like I was barely keeping my head above water in terms of getting done what needed to be done.

After four months away from parish ministry, I began what turned out to be a transition from part-time interim ministry to becoming the called pastor of the congregation I now serve. The entire transition from resignation to full-time pastoral ministry provided some time for rest, recovery, and renewal, though the first months after

leaving my previous congregation were filled with housecleaning, packing, and getting a house ready to sell. Alan Loy McGinnis writes that

One of the best techniques for adjusting to violent upheaval in one area of our lives is to maintain, during that period, stability in as many other areas as possible. We advise our clients who are in the midst of a divorce, for instance, not to change anything else over which they have control.”¹

I had received similar advice from a counselor with whom I met. He was a former pastor who had also gone through a divorce, and he warned me of the toll such an upheaval takes on a person. Unfortunately, the kind of stability of which McGinnis writes was difficult for me to maintain. As I went through a divorce, I also gave up my job, sold my house, moved to a new community, left most of what furniture I retained in storage, and began a new job with, at first, an uncertain future.

One of the results of such turmoil in my personal life was the carryover of poor work habits in my new setting for ministry. At the same time, one of the things that did provide stability and renewal through the entire time of upheaval was a high level of physical activity. I continued to run, bike, and cross-country ski in my new setting, which is in an area highly conducive to such activities. Such activities are ones I now share with my wife, so there are relationship benefits as well as health and energy benefits in such activities.

Now a crunch comes, one of my own choosing and in response to what I perceive to be God’s leading. I continue to struggle with what I see as some poor work habits affecting my effectiveness as a pastor, I have taken on the additional demands of the

¹ Alan Loy McGinnis, *The Balanced Life: Achieving Success in Work and Love* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997) 160.

Doctor of Ministry program, and I also want to continue activities that have been renewing and rewarding. To what do I say no in order to say yes to where God is leading me?

All of this has to do with my pastoral identity and my spiritual life as I seek to become a missional pastor. But it's hard! As I wrote in an earlier paper in this seminar, "Reformation is painful and challenging. I'll need to die to some of my old identity, habits, and ways of working as a pastor. . . . Such reformation will not happen without much personal work and struggle."

CHAPTER 3
SEEKING BALANCE

A Matter of Balance

In the past, I've generally worked well when I've had a clear focus in my work. In some ways, I lost focus through the turmoil and transition of recent years, and I have not sufficiently gained a clear focus. Out of necessity, the Doctor of Ministry program is helping me to regain focus. But it is a struggle. Part of the struggle, in addition to gaining focus, is to find better balance in my life. That is not only a matter of working well or using time well. It is also a matter of good health and energy for the work to which God calls me.

Roy Oswald has written of the importance of balance in the life of clergy for effective ministry. He notes that the balance to be sought is "between caring for oneself and caring for those people whom God has entrusted to us."¹ His focus is on self-care, which he suggests is oriented toward "optimal health": "Optimum health means managing our lives in such a way that we consistently maintain our physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual well-being."² Finding a balance in these areas, Oswald maintains, "is the key to effective ministry. Without it, clergy will not be vibrant messengers of grace."³

¹ Roy M. Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care: Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1991) 209.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 209.

Finding balance, however, has not been easy for me. A comment of Oswald's gives me pause: "We need to learn to take care of ourselves in all areas of our lives, finding that balance between healthy self-care and unhealthy narcissism."⁴ For a variety of reasons, the physical part of self-care is an area in which I've done well. I started running near the end of my first year in seminary in order to get in shape for a summer backpacking trip. I found that I enjoyed running and the level of fitness it provided, and I've continued to run regularly for over thirty years. I also enjoy biking, cross-country skiing, and snowshoeing. Taking time for those activities is an important part of my life. Such activities have provided release in times of high stress and give me energy for my work. They're important to me also because there is a significant presence of heart disease on my father's side of my family. Finally, they're activities that I share with my wife, and as such they're an important part of our relationship.

Oswald's comment regarding "unhealthy narcissism" addresses a concern I have about balance in this particular area of my life. Does my level of physical activity require too much of my time, so that I neglect or avoid the work too which I have been called? How does it fit into getting my work done in this Doctor of Ministry program? To what do I say "No" in order to say "Yes" to where God is leading me?

Physical activity and maintaining a healthy fitness level is far from the only thing to consider in addressing matters of balance between work and self-care. Oswald, for

⁴ Ibid., 7.

example, includes also one's "emotional, intellectual, and spiritual well-being."⁵ What does that mean for me?

Seeking Balance

In an advertisement on the back cover of *Lutheran Partners*, the Board of Pensions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America made an appeal to leaders in the ELCA: "Renew yourself this Lent. Healthy leaders enhance lives."⁶ At the center of the ad was a wheel, with the rim labeled "Spiritual Well-being," the center labeled "A new creation in Christ," and five spokes from the hub to the rim labeled "Physical Well-being, Emotional Well-being, Social/Interpersonal Well-being, Vocational Well-being, and Intellectual Well-being."⁷ Above the wheel was the caption "The 'real' wheel of fortune."⁸ In small print at the bottom of the advertisement was the internet address for the ELCA Health and Wellness Emphasis, where the "Wholeness Wheel"⁹ is displayed, with links to sites giving content to wheel and spokes.¹⁰ The website, part of the ELCA's Division for Ministry, also provides a link to the vision from which the "Wholeness Wheel" comes:

The ELCA envisions a church in which those preparing for and serving in rostered leadership positions, and their spouses and families, will be encouraged, supported, and motivated to grow in their "faith hardiness" which reflects their spiritual,

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ ELCA Board of Pensions advertisement, *Lutheran Partners*, March/April 2003, 56.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ www.elca.org/dm/health/spiritual.html

¹⁰ www.elca.org/dm/health/index.html

physical, emotional, intellectual, interpersonal and vocational health, well-being and wholeness.¹¹

The “Wholeness Wheel” and the vision behind it relate to my effort to find balance in my life, though perhaps wholeness is a better way of describing what I’m seeking. At the same time, as I read through the brief summaries provided for the wheel and spokes, I am reminded that I pay attention to many of the components identified in the “Wholeness Wheel”:

- I have “a disciplined devotional life,” though I spend more time in study than in prayer, contemplation, or reflection.¹²
- I “maximize [my] health by avoiding abusive behaviors and practicing healthy behaviors.”¹³ I am very physically active, although I tend not to get as much sleep as I need.
- I have had some struggles, identified earlier in this paper, in the area of emotional well-being, but also have learned some things about maintaining my emotional well-being in times of stress.
- In the area of social/interpersonal well-being, I am reminded that “one of the greatest challenges for pastors . . . is to keep healthy relationships with partners, children, and friends in an occupation that often demands 24-hour responsiveness to others’ needs.”¹⁴ While my busyness as a pastor was not a primary factor in my divorce, I think I am now more attentive to the need for “nourishing [my marriage and other] relationships with time and attention.”¹⁵
- Vocation wellness is defined as “accepting [God’s] call, recognizing and developing our gifts, seeking a proper fit where our talents and gifts can best be used to serve, and maximizing our health in order to continue to be inspired and be able to inspire others to serve God.”¹⁶ In reflecting on that, it becomes clear that the “Wholeness Wheel” takes into account the impact that one “Well-being” has on the others, and implies that balance is important for wholeness.
- Finally, in the area of intellectual well-being, I am reminded that “our mind is a gift from God, but how we use it is under our control. Using it

¹¹ www.elca.org/dm/health/vision.html

¹² www.elca.org/dm/health/spiritual.html

¹³ www.elca.org/dm/health/physical.html

¹⁴ www.elca.org/dm/health/social.html

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ www.elca.org/dm/health/vocational.html

fully demands time, energy, and care. We must invest in the health of our minds just as we invest in the health of our bodies and spirits.”¹⁷ Participation in this Doctor of Ministry program is, I think, an investment in the health of my mind, but I am finding it difficult to keep all of the other areas in balance.

Paying attention to factors that contribute to balance or wholeness does not automatically result in the balance or wholeness that is sought or desired. In fact, paying attention to these factors is at times more discouraging than helpful. Many physical experiences of seeking balance come to mind for me, especially from sailing, canoeing, kayaking, skiing, or biking. When I have to think carefully about maintaining balance, the battle for balance is often already lost. What I hope for, train for, or practice for is an instinctive balance. I think that I have had that at times in my life and ministry. However, I have been thrown off balance in recent years, and am seeking a renewed sense of balance and wholeness.

In sailing, a gust of wind can throw a boat off balance, and depending on the boat, capsize it. Eugene Peterson writes, with a sense of hope, of the affect of storms that can throw us off balance: “The sea storms that call into question our vocations turn out to be the means of vocational recovery.”¹⁸ Storms of grief, divorce, and loss of job called my vocational identity into question, and threw my life significantly off balance. Through the storms I have discovered a renewed sense of call from God to serve as a pastor. Yet in the years following I have struggled with how to appropriate that sense of call in ways that

¹⁷ www.elca.org/dm/health/intellectual.html

¹⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992) 72.

lead to wholeness and to effective ministry as a pastor. A significant issue for me in all of that is how I use God's gift of time.

CHAPTER 4
MATTERS OF TIME

The Gift of Time

Life is a gift of God. Time is one of the measurements of life, and so also is a gift of God. Psalm 90 includes a prayer that has to do with the good use of God's gift of time: "So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart." (Ps. 90.12, NRSV)

I have struggled at times to use well God's gift of time. I am now in my early fifties, and I am becoming increasingly aware of the limits of time. The prayer of Psalm 90 is taking on greater significance for me. Claus Westermann notes that behind this psalm are people with "an extremely sober recognition of the transitory nature of human existence."¹ (125) James L. Mays reflects on what the prayer of Psalm 90 suggests about the significance of time and its use:

Time is the medium of our mortality and so the favorite focus of our folly. We do not concentrate on the fact that we are given only a limited, though unknown, number of days and years and undertake to live them with wisdom. The young think they are immortal, the old despair because their time is over. Time is a burden when we have to wait, a scarcity when we are busy. It is the source of anxiety, illusion, remorse. Wisdom, in contrast, sees the time given us as 'the unique opportunity' (Barth), the chance to be and do in the fear of the LORD.²

Martin Luther suggests that the psalmist, whom he identifies as Moses, has as his aim "that we do not falsely project for ourselves an endless number of years."³ Luther understands the psalmist to encourage the reader to live with an awareness of the

¹ Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content & Message*, trans. Ralph D. Gehrke (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980) 125.

² James L Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994) 295-6.

³ *Psalm 90* (1534) in *LW* 13:128.

shortness of life and the reality of death. In his interpretation of the phrase “that we may gain a wise heart,” which Luther translates as “that we may be guided by wisdom as we go about our tasks,”⁴ he puts a prayer in the psalmist’s mouth: “God, grant us grace that we may wisely meet our responsibilities, that is, that we may perform them in humility and in Thy fear, ever mindful that because of our sin we are subject to Thy wrath.”⁵ Luther’s perspective on the prayer of the psalmist seems to be that it is fear of God’s judgment that prods one to use time well. Luther does not ignore the Law in his discussion of the use of time. In this he is far from alone, as I will note in my consideration of time management.

The Use of Time

So how do I learn anew how to use well God’s gift of time? Joseph Sittler, in an essay entitled “Maceration of the Minister,” discusses how pastors are led astray in their use of time. While some of his concerns may be dated, he suggests that “the minister is macerated by pressures emanating from the parish, the general church bodies, and the ‘self-image of the minister.’⁶ Some of Sittler’s concerns relate to how a focus on function can keep one from becoming a missional pastor. Of particular interest to me, however, is his solution: “Each minister must order his or her life from the inside, and each must

⁴ Ibid., 129.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Joseph A. Sittler, *Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, ed. Robert M. Herhold and Linda Marie Delloff (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) 59.

order it according to the requirements of interest, nature, and parish situation.”⁷ Sittler has his finger on something significant in my own struggle to use time well. A variety of outside factors seem easily to throw my life out of balance, or to lead me to make poor decisions in my use of God’s gift of time. I need to explore further what helps to shape the inside out of which order comes.

In a similar vein, Dorothy Bass suggests that “how we live in time shapes the quality of our relationships with our innermost selves, with other people, with the natural world, and with God.”⁸ She continues, “We need to develop life patterns that get us through our days not only with greater efficiency but also with greater authenticity as human beings created in God’s image.”⁹ Bass clearly identifies a need of mine to develop a life pattern in which I use well God’s gift of time.

Time Management?

Trying to develop a life pattern in which I use well God’s gift of time leads to the issue of time management. Over the years I have done some reading in the area of time management, and have dabbled in time management techniques, but haven’t developed a good life pattern.

Good management of time seems to have a lot to do with Sittler’s prescription of ordering one’s life from the inside. Alex Mackenzie, for example, maintains that “the

⁷ Ibid., 68.

⁸ Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), xii.

⁹ Ibid., xiii.

very notion of time management is a misnomer. For we cannot manage time. We can only manage *ourselves* in relation to time.”¹⁰ Robert Randall asserts that “the essence of time management is self-management.”¹¹ Stephen Covey argues that “‘time management’ is really a misnomer—the challenge is not to manage time, but to manage ourselves.”¹² Elsewhere, Covey suggests that time management itself is an old paradigm, while the new paradigm is “personal leadership.”¹³ Roy Oswald writes that “time is a non-expandable commodity. We cannot manage time better. Time manages itself quite well—it just keeps going. We must learn to manage *ourselves* better.”¹⁴ Finally, Randall again, who insists that “time management issues always refer to the condition of someone’s self.”¹⁵

It appears that some of my struggles to use time well have more to do with how I manage myself than with how well I can apply one or another suggested time management technique. Yet while most of the above authors suggest that the issue is self-management, they are not hesitant to offer ways to order one’s life and work. Covey, for example, proposes a four quadrant “Time Management Matrix” and suggests that one’s focus should be on matters that are “important but not urgent.”¹⁶ When considering the

¹⁰ Alex Mackenzie, *The Time Trap* (New York: American Management Association, 1990), 12.

¹¹ Robert L. Randall, *The Time of Your Life: Self/Time Management for Pastors* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1994), 11.

¹² Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 150.

¹³ Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 268.

¹⁴ Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 167.

¹⁵ Randall, *The Time of Your Life*, 15.

¹⁶ Covey, *The Seven Habits*, 151-154.

various approaches to time management or personal management, it is important to note how quickly the law comes into play. Hyrum Smith identifies ten “natural laws of human behavior” which, when followed, will lead to better management of one’s time and increased control of one’s life.¹⁷ Behind Covey’s new paradigm is the understanding that most people “seem to have a sense of the basic Laws of Life.”¹⁸ McGinnis writes of “laws of achievement”¹⁹ and identifies “four laws of success, which are as old as the Bible . . . : commitment, discipline, collaboration, and adaptability.”²⁰

When I consider various methods of time management, I find the law functioning in its accusatory way: I always fall short, yet think that perhaps one new method of time management will be just right for me. Gary Simpson, discussing the impact of a managerial age on church structures and the ecumenical movement, connects the work of Alvin Gouldner to the Reformation teaching that the “law always accuses” and notes Gouldner’s sense “that life cannot be lived without the law’s critical process, and yet in the law’s fullness, up close and personal, life cannot be lived with it either.”²¹ Luther’s exposition of Ps. 90.12 emphasizes the role of the law in prodding one to use time well, yet I find myself in the dilemma identified by the apostle Paul in Rom. 7: “I do not do the good I want, but . . . I do what I do not want . . . I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.” (Rom. 7.19-21, NRSV) While time management

¹⁷ Hyrum M. Smith, *The Ten Natural Laws of Successful Time and Life Management: Proven Strategies for Increased Productivity and Inner Peace* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 14.

¹⁸ Covey, *First Things First*, 65.

¹⁹ McGinnis, *The Balanced Life*, 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

²¹ Gary M. Simpson, “Ministry, Management, and the Ecumenical Movement,” *Word & World*, 7/4 (1987), 400.

methods can give me some help, they also expose my weaknesses, and even my sin. At the same time, David Ford provides a helpful reminder: “The idea of managing our time suggests that we are in charge of it more than we are.”²² After exploring wisdom about time and its use, Ford considers the church year and suggests that it “reminds us of the most basic truth of all about our time. Our time is God’s time. We need to allow our time to be managed by God.”²³

Falling Short

I try to use time well, but I fall short. My lateness with this paper offers powerful evidence of that. I need to address a specific part of my struggle to use time well, namely procrastination.

In a recent exploration of my personality type, I gained the insight that in my personality type, one aspect of it “can be the route to aimlessness and procrastination.”²⁴ Procrastination has long been a part of my behavior, especially when facing things that are difficult to do or when I lack a clear focus in my life or work. As a result, I am less effective in my work than I could or should be. As Norman Shawchuck and Roger

²² David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1997), 153.

²³ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁴ Jane A. G. Kise, David Stark, and Sandra Krebs Hirsh, *LifeKeys: Discovering Who You Are, Why You’re Here, and What You Do Best* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 157.

Heuser note, “The church leader who procrastinates . . . is also a slave to ineffectiveness.”²⁵

McGinnis encourages those of us who are procrastinators to “engage in a lifelong battle with procrastination” and offers insight into the struggle: “We procrastinate either because we are perfectionists and cannot bear to have our signature on anything with flaws. Or we procrastinate because of a distaste for difficult tasks and thus fill our time with less important work.”²⁶ I think that my procrastination is a matter of both/and rather than either/or. By procrastinating I can excuse my failure to do as well as I should have done. But I also am easily distracted by less important, even trivial, work or activities, resulting in a failure to use well the gifts that God has given me.

In a discussion on listening to God, Eugene Peterson uses an image that relates also to distractions in work and life. He suggests that our ears have become “something like wells that have been stopped up with refuse: culture noise, throw-away gossip, garbage clatter. Our ears are so clogged that we cannot hear God speak.”²⁷ My attention is often captured by what, in the grand scheme of things, is trivia. There is a lot in a variety of fields that interests me. But what difference does it make? Is it a distraction for me? Do I want to know too much about things that don’t really matter? How much do I need to know about what’s going on in the world to be a good pastor? How does my interest in relatively trivial matters contribute to my procrastination?

²⁵ Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, *Leading the Congregation: Caring for Yourself While Serving the People* (Nashville: Abindgon Press, 1993), 85.

²⁶ McGinnis, *The Balanced Life*, 91.

²⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 102.

McGinnis suggests that “constant vigilance” is the appropriate response to procrastination: “Those who avoid the traps of procrastination refrain from prolonging a difficult project. They take on as much as possible as early as possible [and] concentrate on it until it is finished.”²⁸

Others also offer advice in dealing with procrastination. Mackenzie suggests that

The first step in getting rid of procrastination is to realize that you are in control and make a commitment to yourself to change. Recognize that you have, for whatever reason, developed the habit of putting things off, and remind yourself that you are capable of replacing that bad habit with a better one. . . . Make a conscious effort to develop a “do it now” attitude.”²⁹

Oswald suggests that “a good way to assess whether we are spending time on the most important areas of our jobs and our personal lives is to do a time study.”³⁰ He suggests using a two-week period of time; Shawchuck suggests keeping “a time log for thirty days, twice a year,” while cautioning that “keeping a time log and not assiduously reviewing it is also a waste of time.”³¹ Keeping a time log is one of those difficult tasks I tend to avoid, in large part because I’m uneasy about what it might reveal about my use of time. However, in the past couple of months I have been doing a better job of staying on track in my work apart from the completion of this paper.

Time management plans may be helpful when followed diligently, particularly when dealing with procrastination. Most of all, though, God’s help is needed in this battle, and to this I now turn.

²⁸ Ibid., 92.

²⁹ Mackenzie, *The Time Trap*, 132-133.

³⁰ Oswald, *Clergy Self-Care*, 167.

³¹ Shawchuk and Heuser, *Leading*, 85.

CHAPTER 5
SAYING NO TO SAY YES

Temptations

Whether I procrastinate because I am a perfectionist or because I set aside difficult tasks for interesting distractions, in each case I am dealing with temptation. In the first case, I am tempted to turn my back on God's grace; in the second, I am tempted by something attractive but relatively unimportant.

The "constant vigilance" encouraged by McGinnis applies not only to dealing with procrastination, but with temptation as a whole. Martin Luther captures this need for constant vigilance in his writing on "Lead us not into temptation," the Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Such is life that one stands today and falls tomorrow."¹ So Luther suggests that this petition could read, in part: "'O dear Lord, Father and God, keep us fit and alert, eager and diligent in thy word and service, so that we do not become complacent, lazy, and slothful as though we had already achieved everything."²

Luther has much to say on the battle against temptation. He seems to be fully aware of the power of distractions not unlike those to which I too often succumb:

We live in the flesh and carry the old creature around our necks; it goes to work and lures us daily into . . . all kinds of evil lusts that by nature cling to us and to which we are incited by the association and example of other people and by things we hear and see."³

¹ *LC* 3, 100, in *BC*, 453.

² *A Simple Way to Pray* (1535), in *LW* 43:197.

³ *LC* 3, 102, in *BC*, 453-454.

All of us face temptations, though they may be of different kinds at different points in our lives. I wonder if there is a relationship between how my life was thrown out of balance a few years ago and how easy it is for me to succumb to the temptations of distractions. In any case, Luther recognizes that temptations vary according to changes in our lives:

To experience attack . . . is quite a different thing from consenting to it or saying ‘Yes’ to it. We must all experience it, though not to the same degree; some have more frequent and severe attacks than others. Young people, for example, are tempted chiefly by the flesh; adults and older people are tempted by the world. Others, who are concerned with spiritual matters (that is, strong Christians), are tempted by the devil.⁴

When temptations come, we are up against a powerful force. That is why the best time management techniques in the world do not produce instantaneous success in using well God’s gift of time. All of the natural laws for using time or managing ourselves turn on us. In the face of temptation, Luther knows finally where help is to be found:

At such times our only help and comfort is to run here and seize hold of the Lord’s Prayer and to speak to God from our heart, ‘Dear Father, you have commanded me to pray; let me not fall because of temptation.’ Then you will see that the temptation has to cease and eventually admit defeat. Otherwise, if you attempt to help yourself by your own thoughts and resources, you will only make the matter worse and give the devil a wider opening. For he has a serpent’s head; if it finds an opening into which it can slither, the whole body will irresistibly follow. But prayer can resist him and drive him back.⁵ (Luther LC 110-111)

In a study of Luther’s *Large Catechism*, Marty Marty notes the many distractions that can lead one astray: “Family, finance, success, self-dignity, keeping schedules: all these can be penultimate distractions. But in the end they are always part of a big distraction: the death of the spiritual life, hell made visible. Against this God is asked to

⁴ LC 3, 107, in *BC*, 454-455.

⁵ LC 3, 110-111, in *BC*, 455.

wage war.”⁶ Even “keeping schedules” can be a distraction, perhaps especially when the schedule becomes the most important thing rather than something that helps one to do one’s work well.

Elsewhere, Luther suggests that when we pray for God’s will to be done, “God bids us to pray against ourselves.”⁷ Whether the issue is managing time or managing myself, I need God’s help. God’s help is to be found through prayer that in itself is constant and vigilant.

Frederick Buechner has a gift for presenting the good news of God’s help in startling ways:

What is both Good and New about the Good News is that mad insistence that Jesus lives on among us not just as another haunting memory but as the outlandish, holy, and invisible power of God working not just through the sacraments but in countless hidden ways to make even slobbs like us loving and whole beyond anything we could conceivably pull off by ourselves.

Thus the Gospel is not only Good and New but, if you take it seriously, a Holy Terror. Jesus never claimed that the process of being changed from a slob into a human being was going to be a Sunday-School picnic. On the contrary. Child-birth may occasionally be painless, but rebirth never. Part of what it means to be a slob is to hang on for dear life to our slobbery.”⁸

I am fascinated by the imagery Buechner uses, especially in the uses of the words “slob” and “slobbery.” Part of the struggle against temptation in the area of using time well has to do with hanging on for dear life to old ways, even without conscious intention or desire. It is another way of describing the battle described by the apostle Paul in Romans

⁶ Martin E. Marty, *The Hidden Discipline* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 84.

⁷ *An Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519), in *LW* 42:48.

⁸ Frederick Buechner, quoted in *Celtic Daily Prayer* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 632.

7. Yet God is at work in my life and in the world to make all things new. Some of what that might look like for me will be considered next.

Helpful Practices

Eugene Peterson identifies three “practices that are basic to all pastoral work: the act of prayer, the reading of Scripture, and the practice of spiritual direction.”⁹ While spiritual direction is not something I have explored to any extent in this project, it appears that it is something that I should pursue further. Spiritual direction might provide me with helpful accountability in battling procrastination.

Scripture reading and prayer are already practices of mine. For a number of years I have set aside time each day to read the Bible in a way that allows me to read through the entire Bible in a year. Prayer, in particular, is a practice that I can continue to develop in ways that will help me to use well God’s gift of time. In the previous section, I discussed prayer in the context of dealing with temptation. Prayer is also helpful in approaching the day in a way that opens me to how God wants to work in and through my life. In recent weeks I have added to my daily prayers thanksgiving for the day and a prayer for God’s guidance in my use of it. Such prayers are part of a more extensive “Christian practice of receiving the day.”¹⁰

Even as I am often all too easily distracted from good use of time by a variety of temptations, so also am I easily distracted in prayer. I know I am not alone in that; on the

⁹ Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 15.

¹⁰ Bass, *Receiving the Day*, 18.

night before Jesus' death, even his disciples fell asleep when they were supposed to be praying. Luther, too, longed for greater concentration in prayer:

When Luther's puppy happened to be at the table, looked for a morsel from his master, and watched with open mouth and motionless eyes, he [Martin Luther] said, "Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish, or hope."¹¹

Consideration of concentration in prayer leads to another practice, that of attentiveness. Attentiveness applies not only to prayer, but also to one's work and how one uses time. Robert Wuthnow calls attention to the relationship between discipline and attentiveness in the thinking of Jack Stagliano, an Augustinian friar and professor of studio art at Villanova University:

[He] learned attentiveness as a student, but it is also an idea that has become more meaningful to his spiritual journey as he has matured: "Attentiveness is perhaps an Eastern idea, although it certainly can be found in the West both in Protestant and Catholic writers. One of the things that I was taught even as a novice by one of our very elderly friars was 'Do what you're doing.' That was a primary thing for us as students. When you were in the chapel, you were to be praying. When you were playing basketball, you were to be playing basketball. When you were doing laundry or scrubbing toilets, you were supposed to be doing laundry or scrubbing toilets. Attentiveness to what you are doing at the moment is most certainly a key to spiritual growth."¹²

Attentiveness for me could include the use of a time study suggested by Oswald and Shawchuck. It could also include following a time management plan with an awareness of its limitations. And it should include "critical mindfulness of the patterns

¹¹ *Dog Provides Example of Concentration* (May 18, 1532, No. 274) in *Table Talk Recorded by Veit Dietrich* (1531-1533), in *LW* 54:37-38.

¹² Robert Wuthnow, "Art for the Soul," *Christian Century*, May 3, 2003, 28.

within which we presently live and expectant attention to the possibility that God might have something better in mind for us.”¹³

I chose a title for this paper several months ago, before coming across the same title and a variation on it in books I used in working on it. “Saying No to Say Yes” is a section title in a chapter of Dorothy Bass’s *Receiving the Day*. “Saying Yes and Saying No” is the title of a chapter by M. Shawn Copeland in *Practicing Our Faith*, a book edited by Bass. Both get at something that is essential for my growth in the good use of God’s gift of time. I need to learn to say no to what is of relatively little importance in order to say yes to what God wants to do in and through me. Bass puts it this way:

Discerning renewed and renewing patterns for our days will cause us to look at them with fresh eyes, asking not only what we need to add but also what we need to take away. Indeed, it may be that choosing what not to do will disclose the radical implications of this practice most vividly. The point is . . . to identify the impediments, even the idols that have shut them out of each particular life in the past.¹⁴ (38)

She also notes, in a comment connected to an earlier discussion on the struggle with temptation: “Resisting temptations . . . means figuring out where to say no on a daily basis.”¹⁵

Copeland begins her discussion of the practice of saying no and saying yes by noting the discipline involved in an athlete’s life. That language is understandable to me, and it is a part of my life in which I am quite well-disciplined. She insists that “if we are to grow in faithful living . . . we must learn the practice of saying no to that which crowds

¹³ Bass, *Receiving the Day*, 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

God out and yes to a way of life that makes space for God.”¹⁶ This involves one in a lifelong struggle, but one which can lead to growth and transformation.¹⁷ She also suggests that “for a no to be effective, it must be placed in the larger context of a life-affirming yes.”¹⁸ However, “every yes calls up the unsettling potential of change in our lives. Sometimes, saying yes to one thing means giving up something else.”¹⁹

Deciding what to give up in order to grow toward becoming a missional pastor is a challenge for me! Practices of reading Scripture, prayer, attentiveness, and saying no and saying yes are crucial for my continued growth in faithfulness and in openness to God’s leading. A portion of a poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests that the discipline of such practices is part of a journey toward freedom, which for me would include freedom from perfectionism and procrastination:

Self-discipline

If you set out to seek freedom, you must learn before all things
Mastery over sense and soul, lest your wayward desirings,
Lest your undisciplined members lead you now this way, now that way.
Chaste be your mind and your body, and subject to you and obedient,
Serving solely to seek their appointed goal and objective.
None learns the secret of freedom save only by way of control

Action

Do and dare what is right, not swayed by the whim of the moment.
Bravely take hold of the real, not dallying now with what might be.
Not in the flight of ideas but only in action is freedom.
Make up your mind and come out in the tempest of living.
God’s command is enough and your faith in him to sustain you.

¹⁶ M. Shawn Copeland, “Saying Yes and Saying No,” in *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997) 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Then at last freedom will welcome your spirit amid great rejoicing.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Stations on the Way to Freedom”²⁰

Grace that frees me from a tendency toward perfectionism, which in turn encourages procrastination, is also essential. Henri Nouwen offers words of encouragement as I reflect on my journey through life, and especially upon the difficult and unsettling years of the recent past:

What if our history does not prove to be a blind impersonal sequence of events over which we have no control, but rather reveals to us a guiding hand pointing to a personal encounter in which all our hopes and aspirations will reach their fulfillment? Then our life would indeed be a different life because then fate becomes opportunity, wounds a warning and paralysis an invitation to search for deeper sources of vitality. . . . Then indeed we can break out of the prison of an anonymous series of events and listen to the God of history who speaks to us in the center of our solitude and respond to his ever new call for conversion.²¹

God’s “ever new call for conversion” is another way of speaking, in part, of God’s desire to continue to work in my life to form me into a missional pastor who uses time well.

God’s “ever new call for conversion” is also a call for excellence in ministry, in which procrastination does not result in less than my best. L. Gregory Jones explores the pursuit of excellence in ministry, a “cruciform excellence,” and asks:

Pursuing excellence for its own sake, overcoming mediocrity and being shaped by a creative desire to do whatever you do as well as you possibly can—could that mean practicing discipleship, following a crucified Savior as well as we possibly can, and holding ourselves to a desire for unadulterated excellence in our ministry for the sake of Christ, even with the least, the last and the lost?²²

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Stations on the Way to Freedom,” *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965) 15.

²¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975) 37.

²² L. Gregory Jones, “Excellent Adventure,” *Christian Century*, April 5, 2003, 37.

Standards of excellence in ministry will be defined by faithfulness to Christ, but “our standards of excellence will enable our ministry to grow in beauty, grace, and purpose.”²³

I look forward to growth into such excellence in ministry, including in the use of God’s gift of time, and to participation more fully in what God wants to do through me.

²³ Ibid.

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