

Jerry and Marge Go Large
A Message by Rev. Dr. Richard Lapehn
First Presbyterian Church of Barberton: November 11, 2018

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Galatians 6:7-10

I. In March of this year, the Huffington Post published an article whose title I have borrowed for the title of my message this morning.

For many years Jerry and Marge Selbee owned and operated a quick mart, simply called “The Corner Store,” in the small town of Ewart, Michigan. The town of Ewart is on the Muskegon River and its claim to fame was a music festival billed as “The World’s Largest Hammered Dulcimer Gathering.”

When he operated the store, Jerry was happy to collect the 6% commission paid by the state for every lottery ticket he sold, along with the 2% commission he received for every winning lottery ticket cashed at his store.

Then, Jerry and Marge retired. And they entered a different line of work: how to beat the lottery. Jerry was a whiz with numbers. After studying the lottery system, he found one Michigan lottery game that gave better odds than all the others.

It was called Winfall. On certain weeks, after no one had matched all six number for several weeks, the prizes for lower matches (3 numbers correct, 4 numbers correct) were increased 10X. Jerry figured that if you purchased enough tickets, you had a better than average chance to make money on those specific weeks. So, he bought \$2,200 worth of tickets; then he bought \$3,400 worth; then \$8,000. His system worked, and he and Marge made some money on those certain weeks.

They also spent thousands of hours standing in front of lottery terminals: inserting their numbers, paying, receiving the ticket, and repeating the process for days. After each drawing, Jerry and Marge had rubber-banded stacks of thousands of lottery

tickets that needed to be examined and categorized. This review also took days.

After a few years, the Michigan lottery closed that Winfall game. Jerry was offended. Something that felt constructive had been taken from him. Jerry said, the days spent purchasing, sorting, reviewing, and collecting any winnings “gave me a sense of purpose” in my retirement!

The article makes no judgment about the use of years of their lives in this pursuit, but I will offer an opinion: how sad that years of their lives were devoted to beating the lottery!

There is no mention in the article of time spent in their community helping others through a service club like Kiwanis, or volunteering for their local schools, libraries, food pantries, churches, or Salvation Army.

I failed to mention that after the Michigan lottery closed their Winfall game, Jerry and Marge found out about a similar game in the Massachusetts lottery. They drove more than 600 miles one way to the nearest lottery terminal across the Massachusetts State line to play that game, spending weeks in local motels.

Jerry would drop Marge off at one convenience store, while he went to another to spend all day and night punching in numbers, paying, and amassing the tickets. Whenever they won some money, they increased their purchases. Eventually, they once bought \$720,000 worth of tickets (other family members and friends invested in their retirement pastime): ten days of standing at a lottery terminal for 10 hours per day.

Massachusetts closed their Winfall game after learning that an enterprising group of MIT students had discovered the flaw in the game.

Now 80 years old this year, Marge was quoted as saying, “I really do miss it. I am too young to quit working.”

II. The OT book of Ecclesiastes says there is a time for

everything under the sun. The Bible teaches us to count our days, to make them valuable, to use them for the good of others.

There is a time to be born and a time to die, the Bible says. What we do with the gift of our allotted time between birth and death could make all the difference in the world to another person.

Spending nearly fifteen years of one's life standing in front of a lottery terminal is not a great use of time. Now, Jerry and Marge did not harm anyone. That is true.

But to what great use could Jerry's mathematical skills, and Marge's tenacity and strength, been used to augment and improve the lives of others if they had chosen to do so?

III. There are many inequities in our world. Some are born smart and beautiful, while others are not. Some are born into poverty; others into wealth.

But one thing we all have in common is the same amount of time each day. God has allotted twenty-four hours to each one of us. Due to the sheer number of activities we attempt to cram into a day, it may seem like we get short-changed on our 24-hours some days. But we don't.

The conclusion of a recent study showed the following about how the average persons spends time over the course of her or his lifespan.

Over the course of an average lifetime, we will spend:

- 6 months sitting at stoplights
- 8 months opening junk mail
- 1 year looking for misplaced items
- 4 years doing housework
- 5 years waiting in lines
- 10 years watching our favorite programs on television.

All of those and other activities such as sleep and work account for more than 90% of our lifespan. How will we choose to spend the remaining time? How will we choose to use the days God has allotted to our lives?

IV. In the NT letter to the church in Galatia, Paul writes about sowing and reaping, or, as I like to say, investing our time and discovering years later the return on the investment of our time.

“Do not be deceived,” Paul writes; “God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up” (Gal.6:7,9).

God is a just judge, Paul is saying. If we invest our time entirely for personal benefit for self only, then we will experience a lonely place. But if we invest our time according to the direction of God’s Spirit, we will know eternal life, joy, and a purpose not limited to the here and now.

V. The purpose of my message today is not to suggest that followers of Christ need to be busier. It is not busier lives that we need. What is needed is a review of our time to ensure that it is being invested for God’s glory.

Our time is a valuable resource for which we are all responsible before God. Of course, time spent in leisure, at play, resting, or simply smelling the roses is not wasted time.

In fact, 1 Timothy 6:17 teaches us God “richly provides us with all things for our enjoyment.” We are to take pleasure in our world, and we are to find joy in serving the Lord as we care for one another.

Being a good steward of the time God gives is not really a matter of guarding each minute so that it can be spent productively.

Rather, being a good steward is fully understanding who we are as children of our holy God: temporary citizens of this world, living as exiles until we are called home.

It is understanding that while we are able – and there may be a time in life when, if we live long enough, we are on the receiving end of time and love given to us – we have the blessed opportunity to invest our time in a way that will change eternity for some and bring God the honor and glory God so richly deserves. Amen.