

“Like sand In One’s Fingers”

We didn’t get to the State Fair this year. I always enjoyed the fair; there’s the exhibits, the food, the livestock barns, the food, the people watching, the food, the music, the food. I remember when fair had a sand sculpture demonstration. Using tons of wet sand, sculptors would build colossal sand castles with moats and turrets, drawbridges and people. It was amazing to watch a castle develop before your eyes, especially while eating your favorite fair food.

Even more amazing was that people actually made a living building sand sculptures. One sand artist, an ordained minister named Randy Hofman, views sand sculptures as his ministry. For thirty years he has created monumental works such as “Christ on the Cross,” “The Last Supper,” “Jesus Praying” and “David and Goliath.” Using sand and sea water.

The other amazing thing is that sand sculpting is a purposely temporary and fragile art form. Here today, gone tomorrow, taken by tide, or rain, or wind. The impermanence of sand is part of the magic, part of the beauty.

Most of us, however, devalue the temporary — the moment. If we can’t hold on to it, if something doesn’t last, or have staying power, it doesn’t have value.

We want durability, sustainability, strength and endurance — whether we’re talking about our marriage, our washing machine, our job, our car, our family or our God. We desire things that last. We cling to the permanent, perhaps because, deep down, we know that life is like sand in one’s fingers.

There’s nothing wrong with that kind of thinking. But Ephesians urges us to: “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil” (5:15, 16).

We have so few opportunities to create something beautiful. Every moment counts.

It’s as if Paul is telling us, “Make the most of the chances you get to do something right, because evil always threatens to get in your way.”

Pastor, now sculptor, Hofman says, “Make something beautiful now, because the tide will wash it away later.”

Many want to ask “Why?”

It’s a question asked of the Buddhist monks who create their famed colored sand mandalas only to obliterate them within hours or days. Or to the Navaho Sand Painters who see their colorful mandalas as symbols of healing and total well-being.

The first response to that question might be “Why not?”

Afterall, sand can remain merely sand, stretching endlessly along the shore, flat, formless and undistinguished, or it can yield to the hand of an artist who fashions something beautiful while there is an opportunity to do so.

If I’m sand, I want to say to God, “Make me your work of art!” Life is so short, why not ask God to make you his art? Anne Ross Cousin wrote,

“The sands of time are sinking, the dawn of heaven breaks,  
The summer morn I’ve sighed for, the fair, sweet morn awakes:  
Dark, dark hath been the midnight, but dayspring is at hand,  
And glory, glory dwelleth in Immanuel’s land.”

Paul, who sensed the fleeting of time, understood that his life was but a stretch of sand in which and upon which the Creator was at work. Therefore, he urges us to adopt the same attitude toward our daily business:

- Be careful (5:15).
- Make the most of the time (5:16).
- Don’t be foolish (5:17).
- Do understand the will of God (5:17).

- Don't get drunk (5:18).
- Be filled with the Holy Spirit (5:18).
- Sing songs (5:19).
- Give thanks (5:20).

The second response is that by investing in the moment, we practice the presence of God. Teilhard de Chardin called it sacramentalizing the mundane, the divinisation of the commonplace. This being in the presence of God in the midst of a creative process is rather common to faith-filled artists. The French post-Impressionist painter, Paul Cézanne, is known to have painted Mont Sainte-Victoire more than 60 times. Repetition is a discipline that is more like a chant with a brush, over and over. It is said that for Cézanne, this repetitive painting of this mountain was a meditative, prayerful experience, where he found himself lost in the presence of God. For Cézanne, and countless other artists of every sort, the process is a chance for prayer. It is a chance to be drunk on God; a chance to use time wisely.

What happens is this: an artist finds in the process, in the prayer, that God is present in the moment, in the now. That is the beauty of creativity. It is a chance to pray. It is a chance to feel God's presence, because God is a living verb who speaks only in the language of the present moment. Imagine praying while you work. Imagine your work becoming prayer.

Finally, sand art edifies those who see it. It is the very ubiquity of sand, its sameness, its blandness, its mundaneness that makes these works of art so refreshing. That's why when human beings open themselves to work the will of God in their lives, living carefully, understanding the will of God, being filled with the Holy Spirit, singing and giving thanks — that's why the world regards it as such breathtaking art!

Anyone can be sand! Not everyone can be a castle in the sand!

That's why, like Randy Hofman, we must make the most of our time, creating sculptures to spiritually edify any viewer. He prays in the making, and viewers are awed in the viewing.

He builds them from a child's materials — beach sand and salt water. Those materials, that sand itself, and the water, too, which so quickly returns to the earth, represent and symbolize the fleeting fragility of life, our own impermanence. Part of prayer, part of praising, part of being in the Spirit is to enter the only permanence there is in all creation — heaven within us (Ephesians 5:15-16).

Part of the beauty, the risk and the tragedy is knowing the sand sculptures are frail and will fall. Part of our risk, our own beauty and our own tragedy is knowing the same about ourselves. Part of the beauty is seeking God and finding peace in the permanence of his presence.

Whether we recognize it or not, we are made of sand and water — of "dust" as Genesis tells us (2:7). Our days are numbered. Our time here has inherent restrictions. The tide is rising. The wind is blowing.

We need to use our time wisely, not foolishly. We need to use our talents, our calling, to enter the kingdom of God now, to give of ourselves to others in the process and to pray all the while. If we do, we will find God's beauty inside us, around us, beyond us. God's beauty is the only permanence there is.

Some people construct sand structures knowing they will collapse. Use the moment, no matter how fleeting, give it to God and God will give to you.