

Sermon follow-up
"Live the Life that Unfolds Before You" (Ecc. 12)
Rich Lusk

Elisabeth Elliot is well noted for stressing that God calls us to "do the next thing," which fits well with the theme of the sermon. She quotes this poem:

From an old English parsonage down by the sea
There came in the twilight a message to me;
Its quaint Saxon legend, deeply engraven,
Hath, it seems to me, teaching from Heaven.
And on through the doors the quiet words ring
Like a low inspiration: "Do the next thing."

Many a questioning, many a fear,
Many a doubt, hath its quieting here.
Moment by moment, let down from Heaven,
Time, opportunity, and guidance are given.
Fear not tomorrows, child of the King,
Trust them with Jesus, do the next thing.

Do it immediately, do it with prayer;
Do it reliantly, casting all care;
Do it with reverence, tracing His hand
Who placed it before thee with earnest command.
Stayed on Omnipotence, safe 'neath His wing,
Leave all results, do the next thing.

Looking for Jesus, ever serener,
Working or suffering, be thy demeanor;
In His dear presence, the rest of His calm,
The light of His countenance be thy psalm,
Strong in His faithfulness, praise and sing.
Then, as He beckons thee, do the next thing.

Here is Eliot in an interview explaining how the poem ministered to her in a time of great need:

When I went back to my jungle station after the death of my first husband, Jim Elliot, I was faced with many confusions and uncertainties. I had a good many new roles, besides that of being a single parent and a widow. I was alone on a jungle station that Jim and I had manned together. I had to learn to do all kinds of things, which I was not trained or prepared in any way to do. It was a great help to me simply to do the next thing. Have you had the experience of feeling as if you've got far too many burdens to bear, far too many people to take care of, far too many things on your list to do? You just can't possibly do it, and you get in a panic and you just want to sit down and collapse in a pile and feel sorry for yourself.

Well, I've felt that way a good many times in my life, and I go back over and over again to an old Saxon legend, which I'm told is carved in an old English parson somewhere by the sea. I don't know where this is. But this is a poem which was written about that legend. The legend is "Do the next thing." And it's spelled in what I suppose is Saxon spelling. "D-O-E" for "do," "the," and then next, "N-E-X-T." "Thing"- "T-H-Y-N-G-E."

The poem says, "Do it immediately, do it with prayer, do it reliantly, casting all care. Do it with reverence, tracing His hand who placed it before thee with earnest command. Stayed on omnipotence, safe 'neath His wing, leave all resultings, do the next thing." That is a wonderfully saving truth. Just do the next thing.

So I went back to my station, took my ten-month-old baby, tried to take each duty quietly as the will of God for the moment. One of the very first duties that faced me was what in the world I was going to do about the church. We had 50 newly baptized believers, Christians, who a year before had not been Christians. Jim Elliot had been teaching them daily and preaching on Sundays. Jim Elliot was not there anymore. There was no other male missionary.

Now I happen to be a very firm believer in men taking the leadership in church. I believe that God has clearly defined the positions of authority in both the home and the church as belonging to men. So whether you agree with me on that or not, let me just say that I get my ideas from the Scriptures and that's where I had to start when I got back to my little jungle station. I was not going to run that church. But I was literally the only person around who had the Scriptures. There was nobody else that could teach those believers. So what was I to do?

One of the last things that Jim had said to me when I said to him before he left, "What will I do if you don't come back?" was "You must teach the believers." So I took two of the young men that Jim had picked out as potential leaders in the church. I explained to them that it was not my job to be the head of the church. It was their job to take responsibility. I said, "I'm here to help you."

So on Saturday afternoon, each week after that time, I would call one or the other of these men to my house. We would sit down together, translate a few simple verses from Spanish and Greek and English and whatever else I could draw on into Quichua. Then these men would get up and preach the sermon, which I had helped them make an outline for. I would draw out of them their own understanding of the Scriptures and try to get them to give me some illustrations from their jungle experience. They would get up and preach-not a very good sermon. I could have done a better job. But I felt that it was not my job to take over the church simply because I was competent to do it. It was my job to encourage these men so that they would become competent.

Then there was the question of a diesel motor. What did I know about diesel generators? We had one for electricity, which we used sometimes in the evenings for a couple of hours. So I had to figure out how to run the diesel motor. I had to figure out how to keep the airstrip clean. I had to pay about 40 Indians swinging machetes to do that, which made me their foreman. I'd never been anybody's foreman before.

I was teaching a women's literacy class. We had a boy's school taught by an Ecuadorian teacher that I had to sort of supervise and encourage and pay and do various things that I was not used to doing. I had the medical work. I had the translation of the Book of Luke, which Jim and I had finished only in rough draft when he was killed. I was going to carry on with that, because, as I said, there were no Scriptures in Quichua. If the church was to grow, they had to have spiritual food. So I went ahead with the translation of Luke.

The grass in the jungle grows unbelievably fast, so I always having to hire people to cut the grass, to clean out the pineapple bed, to cut the branches away from the trail between my house and the airstrip. And I tried to decide what to do about a hydroelectric system that Jim had just begun to put in. I didn't know whether I should try to finish that or forget it. You can imagine how tempted I was to just plunk myself down and say, "There is no way I can do this." I wanted to sink into despair and helplessness. Then I remembered that old Saxon legend, "Do the next thing."

I remembered a verse that God had given to me before I went to Ecuador in Isaiah 50:7: "The Lord God will help me; therefore, shall I not be confounded. Therefore, have I set my face like a flint and I know that I shall not be ashamed."

What is the next thing for you to do? Small duties, perhaps? Jobs that nobody will notice as long as you do them? A dirty job that you would get out of if you could have your own preferences? Are you asked to take some great responsibility, which you really don't feel qualified to do? You don't have to do the whole thing right this minute, do you? I can tell you one thing that you do have to do right this minute. It's the one thing that is required of all of us every minute of every day. Trust in the living God. Now what is the next thing? Well, perhaps it's to get yourself organized. Maybe you need to clean off your desk, if you have a desk job that needs to be done. Maybe you need to clean out your kitchen drawers, if you're going to do your kitchen work more efficiently. Maybe you need to organize the children's clothes.

I know what an enormous job that is for Valerie, my daughter. All of a sudden, the children are coming out saying, "I can't wear this. This is too short or this is too long or this doesn't fit me anymore." What do you do with those things? If you're going to save them for the next child, you've got to put them somewhere where you can find them. So you just do that one thing. Somehow or other, the peace of God descends upon us when we take things calmly, peacefully and humbly as the next thing that God has assigned us to do.

About three years ago, I think it was, my daughter and her husband were going away for a weekend and taking with them the nursing baby. The baby was just a few weeks or months old. Val and Walt decided to go off for a weekend. They asked me if I could stay with the other children. I was delighted. I live on the other side of the continent from my children and grandchildren, and I was delighted for the opportunity.

So I stayed with them. In the first day, I don't remember ever being so busy in my life. I mean, it was "Granny this" and "Granny that" and

"Granny, will you read us a story?" and "Granny, can we have some more juice?" and "Granny, would you pull my pants up?" "Granny, would you pull my pants down?" "Granny, can we have some juice?" "Granny, can we go outside?" "Granny, what time is supper?" Until I really thought I would go mad.

Well, my dear sweet daughter had the good sense to call me that evening. She said, "Well, Mama, how are you doing?" I said, "Wonderfully, Val." And then I said, "But I'm not sure I can make it through the next three days." Then I assured her that her children were wonderful children. They're not disobedient. They're not unruly. Everything was going along really very well, when you think of the way some households are run. But I said, "I keep thinking, 'Valerie's got a baby to nurse. That takes about six hours a day. How does she do it?' So tell me, Val, how do you do it?" She laughed and she said, "Well, Mama, I'll tell you how. I do what you told me years ago to do. Do the next thing. Don't sit down and think of all the things you have to do. That will kill you. It's overwhelming. It's daunting if you think of all the things that are involved in a task. Just pick up the next thing."

I find this even in the Scriptures. Tucked in the back of the Book of Mark, following the story of the Crucifixion, we read this lovely little story. Mark 15:42: "By this time, evening had come. And as it was preparation day (that is, the day before the Sabbath), Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Council, a man who looked forward to the kingdom of God, bravely went into Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate was surprised to hear that He was already dead, so he sent for the centurion and asked him whether it was long since He died. When he heard the centurion's report, he gave Joseph leave to take the dead body. So Joseph bought a linen sheet, took Him down from the cross, wrapped Him in the sheet and laid Him in a tomb cut out of the rock and rolled a stone against the entrance."

Can't you imagine the disciples and Mary and Martha and the other bewildered women, sitting in absolute dejection and perplexity when their Lord and Master and King had just died? They couldn't think of one single thing to do. Here came this godly man, who looked forward to the kingdom of God, who bravely went in and asked for the body of Jesus. He could think of one thing to do. He did the next thing. That must have been a tremendous cheer and encouragement to those discouraged people.

See <http://www.backtothebible.org/index.php/Gateway-to-Joy/Do-the-Next-Thing.html>.

Commenting on the same poem Eliot cites, Ray Van Neste says,

There is much simple wisdom here. Do you find yourself on Monday feeling your soul is scorched, terribly aware of your inadequacies, fearful of what is to come? Since God is still in heaven and His steadfast Word declares His love for you, just carry on and do the next thing. Take the next step of obedience. Do you worry how your children will turn out, what the future will hold for your church, how the finances will look at

the end of the month? Resist the allure of self pity, and just take the next step of obedience. We are typically given enough grace just for the next step. Fret not about what lies around the bend. Perform faithfully the next step, and we will make it home safely in the end.

This poem is a balm to my soul.

How do find the strength to “do the next thing”? Solomon’s wisdom teaches us that we have to defy the spirit of darkness that often grips us. We have to defy feelings of darkness and doubt that creep over us. We have to preach the gospel to ourselves, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it. We have to remind ourselves who God is and what God has declared about us – that we are his people, his new creation.