

Title: Wise Living
Text: Ephesians 5: 15 – 17
Date: August 19, 2018

When I was considering my lectionary options a few weeks back I fairly quickly gravitated towards this selection from Ephesians for today. I suspect some of my reasoning will strike you as fairly obvious, but there is an added dimension to my thinking that might take us in unexpected directions.

For one, I bet I don't have to do much to get you to agree that it feels as though **"the days are evil."** We live in an age when it seems as though our democracy is under attack, and truth and morality have become entirely relative. We live in an age where Jimmy Carter claims that we have lost our standing in the world as a moral leader. We live in an age when the strides we thought we made in addressing racism and care for the planet are systematically being undermined. We live in an age when those fleeing the most horrifying of circumstances come to our borders and are treated as though they were less than human. No, I don't think it would take much to convince you that the days are evil.

So if the days are evil, Paul tells us to make the most of our time. With our packed schedules, most of us instinctively read that as an exhortation to even better time management. But Paul does not use the word *chronos* for time here, as in hours of the day. He uses the word *kairos*, conveying the sense of a unique moment in time pregnant with opportunity. Instead of **"making the most of the time,"** we might be better off reading this as "redeeming" the time, or "buying it back" as our original inheritance. Don't live as though the evil days are winning! This is the time for living in the good works for which God created us (2:10). We *cannot* look on the world, or our community, or our days, as simply irredeemably "evil."

Some of you may have remembered my quoting René Girard in the context of understanding the atonement. He made a surprising comment last month that might shed some light on this. A roomful of despairing theologians asked him what should be done in these apocalyptic times. He replied, **"We might begin with our own sanctity."** Christopher Shinn described this as a typical Girardian comment, being both modest and grandly challenging. He writes, **"The most important thing we can do in the face of catastrophe is to look at ourselves, try to understand our own violence, and become better. Could anything be simpler, or more difficult?"** (*Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 20)

This is the language of wisdom, which brings us back to the beginning: **"Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise."** This is the line that captured my imagination, and much could be said to unpack this. For starters, we are called to recognize that true wisdom is not just about abstract thinking, but has as much to do with practical living.

Now I could make my life simple, and just reflect on these beautiful words as they stand. However, I have decided to make my life more difficult by throwing in some context. This text is a kind of hinge between the black and white moral exhortations starting with chapter four, and the relatively grayer areas of personal relations in the family and the workplace in the verses that follow (5:22-6:9). I am quite mindful that just a few verses later Paul says, **"Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord."** (5:22) Is this then an example of wise living? In preparing for a wedding once I asked the couple if they had any preference for what scripture I might use in my reflection. The response was, "Choose what you want, but just don't read anything from Paul." In the following chapter Paul says, **"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling"** (6:5). Was Paul indifferent to slavery? Is this an example of wise living? I'll resist the temptation to try and answer that question right now!

I hope you know that Jesus is my “go to” person when it comes to wise living. I have spoken before of Jesus as a wisdom teacher. Before my arrival I am told you have studied together the wonderful book by Cynthia Bourgeault, “The Wisdom Jesus.” Jesus is the true wisdom teacher; whereas Paul, for the most part, concerns himself with doctrine, and standards for behavior in the church and in the home. I wonder if you would agree with me that Paul seems to have had a lot more to do with shaping what the church looks like than Jesus.

Seventeen times throughout the Gospels Jesus says, “follow me.”

Might not this be the best example of living “**not as unwise people but as wise**”? The truth that Jesus taught was a way to be, rather than something to know and believe. And while I haven’t bothered to “fact check” this, Dr. James Danaher writes, “**Of the 183 questions asked of Jesus throughout the four Gospels, he answers only three. His usual response is to ask a question in return, answer a different question than the one asked, or simply refuse to answer.**” He goes on to point out that Jesus “**asks 307 questions throughout the Gospels.**” This is hardly the basis for formulating a good theology, but it does sound like the mark of a wisdom teacher. Jesus offers us *a way to be* as we live towards God and others in this world, rather than something to know and believe. Danaher concludes, “**We experience transformation into his likeness [wise living?], not by what we know and believe, but by falling in love with the things that Jesus said and did because we recognize them as divinely beautiful and good.**”

So now you might reasonably ask the question, “Why did you bother to start by quoting Paul, only to turn around and *diss* him?” Fair question, but not a fair conclusion.

While we would like to assume that Paul is psychologically and emotionally mature, he is still a product of his period of history, and first-century assumptions. In some respects he was doing the best that he could in his context. His call to live as wise people was both sincere, as well as a testimony to the evolutionary ways in which our consciousness develops. I almost see the wisdom of Christ that had infected him as a kind of Trojan horse that was continually leading him to deeper depths. So when we look at Paul, we see not someone who was fully evolved (whatever that might mean), but someone who was continuing to evolve. This should be of encouragement to us who are likewise products of our own time and culture.

So while it is true that Paul *did* say that wives should be subject to their husbands, and while he *did* say elsewhere, “**Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever**” (I Cor. 7:21); it is also true that he said “**There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.**” (Gal. 3:28) I would almost suggest that anything that you find troubling in the writings of Paul could be addressed and mitigated by the words of Paul himself as he grapples and engages with a truth that is bigger than himself and bigger than his culture. While it is risky to speculate, I would like to imagine that if he were to come back and see the church today, he might speak in softer tones, and say, “Yeah, I see how you came to that conclusion in matters I never conceived of. I see how the seeds of the truth that I spoke blossomed into the truths that you hold dear today.” On a similar vein, Richard Rohr claims that both Jesus and Paul “**fully laid the theological foundation for the dismantling of patriarchy and autocracy, and for the full understanding of an egalitarian world of equal dignity.**”

Perhaps living as wise people could also be described as living lives where we are fully awake. Richard Rohr goes on to say that, “**Waking up should be the final goal of all spiritual work, sacraments, and Bible study, but, at least in the West, this has not been the case. . . . Organized Christianity largely described waking up in terms of growing up, and that**

growing up was almost entirely interpreted in highly moralistic terms – and even that morality was largely culturally defined!”

When Paul says be careful how you live, the Greek word is *peripateō*, which means “to walk.” This sounds akin to a phrase that is often used here at Shepherdstown Presbyterian. We might think of living wise lives as walking in the way and spirit of Jesus. We are people of *The Way*. So then may we wake each other up, walk in the way and the spirit of Jesus, and continue to be awake as we bring our hearts and minds to the suffering and problems of our world, for the days are evil.

And allow yourself the grace afforded Paul as we all grow into all that this means.

Amen

Ephesians 5: 15 – 17

“Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, “making the most of the time, because the days are evil. “So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.