

Living Wisely – Ephesians 5:15-20

August 19, 2018

Please pray with me. Great God of steadfast love, we study your works and delight in your ways. Illumine our understanding by your Holy Spirit, that we may reverence your name, grow in your wisdom, and discern between good and evil. Amen.

Like so many of the scripture passages we encounter, this passage from Ephesians is no exception. By that I mean it is as applicable to our lives today as it was two thousand years ago, just with different circumstances.

Jesus and his disciples had always participated in temple and synagogue worship and later as the disciples began proclaiming the gospel, they began within the synagogues and taught there before branching out to new Gentile locations. Once again, we are reminded that Christianity has its roots in the Jewish tradition. It is likely that even when a local Christian community was obliged to separate itself from the Jewish synagogue it still considered itself a synagogue and in early Christian writings local congregations are sometimes referred to as “synagogues”. It also seems that the worship life of the early Christians followed synagogue customs – prayer, teaching, fellowship and the two special rites or sacraments that are still with us today, breaking bread in memory of Jesus and the initiation of new believers through baptism. Admittedly both rites have undergone changes over the years as has the way we worship.

Although the synagogues were the place for community worship, Jewish family worship took place in the home. Children received religious instruction at

home and Sabbath meals were family events. Grace was said several times during the meal, over each main dish, over bread and over wine. The women prepared food and lit candles and the men said the blessings. This has not changed much over the years in the Jewish tradition.

When the book of Ephesians was written, either by the apostle Paul or someone who studied with him, the belief among Christians was that Christ would return to earth in their lifetime and therefore they should be ready for that day so that Christ would take them with him. In other words, these were apocalyptic times.

There are three distinct and yet intertwining themes in this passage. First, Paul tells the Ephesians – and us – to make “the most of the time, because the days are evil.” The world hasn’t changed all that much in this regard unfortunately. While Paul’s world had plenty of evil in it, our world has even more. The developed world is much larger, the population is many times larger and there is evil throughout. The armies in Paul’s time didn’t have the tools to kill as many people at one time nor did they have the sophisticated weapons, but war was a constant then even as it is now. While we in the United States are not in a so-called declared state of war, we are waging wars on drugs, crime, poverty, the decline of our environment, and the list goes on. I doubt any one of us would hear the words, “the days are evil” without being reminded of the events of 9/11, or the Boston Marathon bombing, or the several tragic mass shootings in schools and concerts.

How do we make the most of the time we have left – and we don’t know what that is? There are many avenues open to us to transform the world before it

becomes too late and rather than seeking personal gain, Paul is suggesting we should work in a corporate manner – we should work together for improving the world. What does that look like in today’s world? We here at Tory Hill contribute to what was the Amigos Fund and is now being restructured into a program that is more in keeping with the needs of the children in Honduras. We always take part in the Buxton Toy Box project, purchasing toys for children who otherwise wouldn’t have much Christmas and putting together a Christmas dinner for a needy family. Individually we also participate in different ways to make this world better.

Recycling has become an issue that is being discussed and acted upon with many communities now requiring residents to sort garbage from recycling and penalizing them if they don’t. Communities are also promoting composting which not only reduces waste, but returns natural products to the earth for reuse. The number of communities participating is growing. We also are constantly reminded to consider our gas consumption and the ozone layer. Global warming is a hotly debated subject which we here in the lower 48 states probably are not as aware of. However, I remember being in Alaska in 2007 and watching the glaciers “calve” which is when pieces break off and slide into the ocean melting away. It is a stark reminder that climate change really is taking place and we need to heed that warning.

“Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” Living as a Christian doesn’t come naturally, but rather it requires discernment and wisdom – that is the world we live in, ruled by Satan and those who would bring us down to

their level. The author of Ephesians commands us to understand God's will, so apparently God's will is discernible. Really!! Traditionally it is the role of Lady Wisdom to reveal God's will to human beings, but whether it is God or Lady Wisdom, I find it difficult to discern God's will oftentimes. I don't mean general guidelines for being a Christian, but how do I know which path He has planned for me? That is often the hard part. Sometimes it just involves watching Him close doors I have attempted to open and waiting until the open door comes along. As I have said before, my faith is deep, but my patience is pretty much non-existent.

The new Christians at Ephesus are urged to "not get drunk with wine...but be filled with the Spirit" in verse 18 both because this behavior harms the body of Christ by diminishing one of its members and also because it wastes the precious time left before Christ comes again. So apparently there was an alcohol problem in Paul's time as well. This is another of the wars we wage today and it is so unfortunate. There is more than one reason, genetics included, but oftentimes we use alcohol and drugs to mask the emptiness in our lives, to self-medicate and this could be another whole sermon so I am not going to dwell on it today.

The second theme is the corporate nature of faith; the importance of the community worshipping together and while this passage is not primarily focused on worship, nevertheless worship is at the core of who we are as Christians. What really piqued my interest was the next verse, "as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts." I think that one of the greatest gifts God has given us is the gift of music. Music is a very important part of our worship service for several reasons – one

being giving thanks and praise to God. You may go home today not really remembering anything I said, but instead find yourself singing words, verses or a whole song that we sang today. Music touches our souls that much. We all have favorite hymns to sing in church and most generally at a funeral or memorial service families will request a favorite hymn or two that meant a lot to the deceased person.

Johann Sebastian Bach is considered by many to be one of the greatest composers who ever lived. Bach realized his music was a gift from God and that he had a responsibility to use his gift to the glory of God and so when he wrote a piece of music he always wrote the letters S.D.G. at the bottom of the music. Those letters stand for Soli Deo Gloria which means “To God alone be the glory.” Every year at Lent we sing “O Sacred Head Now Wounded”, one of Bach’s compositions that is still in our hymn books, and his “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” is often used at weddings and funerals. Bach isn’t the only one who gave God thanks for his gift. Harry Lauder, Scottish singer and songwriter, sang to an overflowing audience in a concert in Chicago. At the end the audience gave him a standing ovation and then in unison said, “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” to which Lauder replied, “Don’t thank me! Thank the good God who put the songs in my heart!”

This scripture reminds me of what Martin Luther said about music: “Singers are never sorrowful. Music makes people kinder, gentler, more reasonable. The devil flees before the sound of music.” There is a reason music, often classical music, is played in doctor and dentist offices and many public buildings – it has a

soothing effect. Sit outside sometime and listen to the birds. See if that doesn't transport you up, up and away. More of God's music.

The final theme in this passage is that we are to give thanks always and everywhere. Give "thanks to God the Father at times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." What matters isn't whether an event is good or bad, but rather that we see God's protective goodness in all of it. When bad things happen people ask, "where is God in all of this?" I always tell them to look for God in the helpers, the first responders and those on the sidelines who jump in to help. He is there, but sometimes it is difficult to see Him.

We are the church, we are the Christians and it is up to us carry forth the church's vocation – to be the church "filled with the Spirit." What does that look like? A group of folks like you and me, on the path toward formation and maturity, "singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" that rise out of grateful hearts. Amen.