

## **“Redeeming the Time”**

*Ephesians 5: 15-20*

*Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost/August 11, 2024*

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Garrison Keillor tells one of his famous Lake Wobegon stories about a Lutheran pastor. Pastor Ingqvist is alarmed when he reads Dear Abby columns and notices how often she advises her readers to speak to their pastors. “Talk to your minister,” Abby counsels “a fourteen year old deeply in love with a 50-something married man serving serious time in a federal penitentiary.” As she pours out her love for Vince, in her letter, her belief in his innocence, the fact that his wife never loved him ... not like she, Trish, can love him, and the fact that despite his age and their never-having met except in letters, there is something indescribably sacred and precious between them, all that Pastor Ingqvist can think is: “You’re crazy. Don’t be ridiculous.”

Crazy. Ridiculous. The biblical word is foolish. The author of Ephesians says: “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 ...” Foolishness is one of the great marks of the human condition. Accidental and otherwise. I am known to be a little absent-minded. For the last ten years I have gone to the wrong cabinet at home to find the coffee mugs in the morning. I then go to the opposite cabinet to find water glasses. I don’t know why; I just do. I left my book in the refrigerator when I took out a carton of milk. Maybe I am not thinking. Paul would agree. And sometimes our foolishness as individuals is also writ large in human affairs. Historian Barbara Tuchman wrote an insightful book, *The March of Folly*. Her thesis is that governments throughout history regardless of place or period pursue policies contrary to their own interests. Humankind, she says, “makes a poorer performance of government than of almost any other kind of human activity.” They often lack wisdom, she says, wisdom defined as “the exercise of judgment, as acting on experience, common sense, and available information.” She muses, for example, why did the Trojans drag that wooden horse into Troy, knowing the Greeks had a trick up their sleeve? Why did the British insist on coercing the American colonies into obedience, even when George III’s counselors were advised that such action could be catastrophic? Why did we sink ourselves into the deep morass of the Vietnam War when other alternatives were available? Foolishness is the answer. “Wooden-headedness,” she says, “the source of self-deception, is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in government.”

The Bible spends as much time talking about human foolishness as it does our sinfulness. The Psalmist says that the fool says in his heart there is no God! Jesus calls the person who builds bigger and bigger barns to store wealth a fool, not evil, because he has no perspective and fails to realize that a coronary is right around the corner. Because the days are evil, says Paul, we need to face our foolishness and acquire wisdom. We live in a world that not only requires ideals to confront evil, but it also requires wise and clear thinking.

Finding wisdom, though, is not automatic. It is our choice as to whether we will be wise or foolish, to determine how we make the most of the time. None of this comes easily or naturally, but Paul launches us onto the right path. He says first we have to understand the will of God. We can make the most of time by using every opportunity we have to discern if we are living as Christianly as possible. Be careful how you live! Take care that your practices show forth Christ. We may be in the world, but we are not of it. We live in a time and place, and we are not called to be strange, but we are called to live in relationship to Jesus Christ so that how we live exhibits him. We need to exercise our brain matter to remember that. We are to use time as a gift, not squander it with the seductive evils of the world that destroy body, mind, and spirit. That’s his reference to drunkenness and debauchery. Instead, we are to center our time in a unique practice. I bet you didn’t think this would be the path to wisdom. But Paul does.

That practice is called worship. He moves right in to a discussion about worship. “Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts.” A relationship with God requires a time and a practice that declares what is ultimately worthy of our devotion. We need to take time to offer praise, experience wonder and awe, and to remember that we are recipients of an extraordinary grace that we have neither earned nor deserved by the standards of our corrupt world. We need a time and place to come to where we are formed and shaped to look a little more like Jesus in our behavior and attitudes, a place where the Spirit can grow us into the image of Christ. We need a time and place to remind us who we are and whose we are, what we were made for, what we were not made for. We call

that place worship. Worship is that part of time that is carved out of time to redeem the time. I like to think that's what we do here every Sunday. In this foolish and often evil world, a wrinkle in time and space occurs called worship, and in that opening, the life of heaven drops into our world and into our lives. Here we can be filled with the Spirit and journey along the path towards making the kind of difference in the world to which God is calling us. It all begins here in worship: the Christian is shaped here, or it's not shaped anywhere. I also know that that kind of worship doesn't always take place inside these four walls. You can experience the wonder and grace of God in other ways too.

Writing in her book, *Thrive*, Arianna Huffington, the editor and cofounder of the Huffington Post, has known much about success in the form of wealth and power, but that was really not enough. In 2007 she collapsed from exhaustion. From that experience, she realized that her life and her definition of success had to change. Her definition of success now includes what she calls "a third metric," which embraces well-being, wonder, giving – and wisdom. Here is how she defines it:

- Understanding life as a classroom where we can learn even from our struggles
- Practicing and expressing gratitude
- Paying attention to our intuition and interior life
- Appreciating the difference between information and wisdom
- Slowing down in our culture of hurry sickness
- Being mindful instead of operating on automatic pilot

We worship in these many ways too, and especially when we find ourselves as part of something bigger than our own individual heartbeats or aspirations, when we learn to get out of ourselves. I read this interesting definition of worship: "Worship focuses not so much on personal problems or on creating energy for the coming week, as on being reconstituted by losing ourselves in the meaning of the whole. Our enormous trivia is put into perspective." Paul also knows that worship is not complete until we express our worship in gratitude. Be careful how you live ... make the most of time ... understand the will of God ... singing and making melody ... "giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Unwise people rush through life without thinking or stopping to give thanks. But wise people cultivate gratitude. They slow down; they notice the circumstances of life and pay attention to the people around them. They notice when they are the recipients of something they didn't create. With an attitude of gratitude, they face challenges and difficulties with a positive attitude. They ask one of the most difficult questions: "How can I be thankful in this moment? What can I learn about myself and the world?"

It reminds me of the story of a man who went to his rabbi and complained, "Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?" The rabbi answers, "Take your goat into the room with you." The man is skeptical, but the rabbi insists, "Do as I say and come back in a week." A week later he returns and looks more upset than before. "We cannot stand it," he tells the rabbi. "The goat is filthy." The rabbi then tells him, "Go home and let the goat out. And come back in a week." A radiant man returns to the rabbi a week later, exclaiming, "Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it now that there's no goat -- only the nine of us."

It's a matter of perspective, isn't it? You can be grateful, or you can be bitter. Where does the path to wisdom lie? Practice everyday thinking of the gifts that have come your way. The warmth of sunshine, an unexpected greeting from a stranger, the smile of a baby as you gaze into a face of wonder and delight, a beautiful book, a great song. But think also of the hardships you have endured too. What is in them that is instructive, that can be grace-filled too. And then - give thanks for it all. Your journey towards wisdom will not be without bumps and starts. After all, it is a foolish and evil world, and it requires us to make the most of time, to redeem the time, in understanding God's will, in worshiping, and in being grateful. A truly wise person will know that patience will be required and the knowledge that when we are foolish, we can turn to the One who is infinitely more wise than we. For in a particular time and place, wisdom became a person in Jesus. This wisdom that made the heavens and the earth was born in a manger, lived among and fed a hungry people who yearned to know how to live wisely in a foolish and evil world. He modeled for them a wise life of living on behalf of others and emptied himself to become a servant and to die and to rise for us to join us to God forever. The world would call Christ foolish, but on the third day this so-called fool was raised from the dead, vindicating God's wise way of making the most of time. Thanks be to God! Amen!