

Making the Most of Now - 8.15.21

Sunday, August 15th, 2021

Sermon by Dawn Jefferson at TriCon Church on Zoom

Ephesians 5:15-20

Would you pray with me?

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me,

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me,

...make me, mold me, fill me, use me...

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Great Author and Divine Director, we are grateful that you continue to write new chapters for our lives. Thank you for the page that includes this day. As we contemplate your wisdom and your will, give us the overflowing of your Spirit that we might more clearly discern and more courageously become accountable for the times in which we live. As you have offered your comfort and care as you have sustained us in community, helps us to understand what you have for us next. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Looking back on my sermons so far this summer I can see the different offerings from who we are in Christ and the Spirit to how God loves us and takes care of us in times of struggle and pain. Today, for our final time together for this season (I do hope you invite me back again one day.), I'd like for us to consider the **where** and the **when** it is to be in Christian connection. This week's lectionary texts have us focusing on the larger topic of wisdom.

In studying the language of this section of Ephesians, we see that Paul is not merely listing things we should and shouldn't do as much as he is considering the nature of wise and foolish choices and lifestyles. As usual, Paul is concerned about the marketing of Christianity. Ephesians is an outward facing book. While yes, he is invested in what early Christians believed and felt, he is also concerned with how they look and seem to non-Christians and potential Christians. Sometimes, the more believers stood out, the more different they were socially could affect the standing of their church. And other times their being counter-cultural was what was necessary.

Here, we have a useful reflection on the nature and definition of wisdom. When to blend; when to resist. So as Paul is ministering to his followers, he too is very cognizant of the social climates in Ephesus and other places. When we read these letters of Paul, while we sometimes take them as one whole doctrine, they are actually responding to the different climates and cultures of different communities in the ancient world. Each letter to a

different city addresses different concerns. Paul is trying to lead several different groups of people in how they can survive, thrive and live for Christ in sometimes hostile spaces.

Let us take some time looking at the text more closely today... Again we are looking at the 5th chapter of Ephesians. Paul is signaling here that the truest way to know if there is wisdom is from wise choices. Simply -- wise people do wise things. Following Christ is wise, partaking in light, reproofing unfruitful works -- all wise.

Many of the wise acts in this text are more vague though; they are in contrast to examples of foolish behavior. First, being careful how you live translated in the King James version says “walking circumspectly” and that can mean a lot of things. In scripture the word to walk is more metaphorical; it relates to “making one’s way, progressing, making good use of opportunities, regulating one’s life.” Circumspectly means accurately and diligently, but even more to “carefully consider all circumstances and possible consequences,” checking out the options. So when I think of walking circumspectly or being careful how you live, I imagine a person circling their pool table to discover all the angles and measuring which choice is the best or most advantageous shot to tap or hit the cue ball. It is not so much rooted in hesitation as it is in contemplation. Paul says that wise people are careful how they live. Then, he writes that wise people make the most of time. This verse is the real focus for this sermon.

“Making the most of time” is not filling your time up or time management. It is translated as “redeeming the time,” which helps explain some of the intentions here. A word like redeem is interesting because it shifts us into a space of power and authority. One has to have a certain kind of position, privilege even to be able to redeem something. It can be a kind of economic power to purchase back or buy something as Christ did for our salvation. He redeemed us from the powers of death and sin. He recovered us from something we could not have purchased on our own. It’s language Paul uses a lot. It often makes me uncomfortable, as capitalism often does. I’m not the biggest fan of transactional language in spiritual contexts. But I’ve been making peace with the ways in which someone can redeem something for their own purposes or make the most of a bad situation. That even though this sin system was rigged against us humans, Christ uses that system, uses his privilege through love for my benefit. My being redeemed doesn’t make me less valuable; quite the contrary, the very engagement of redeeming me implies that I am worth something.

So the more I thought about this, the more I could see how carefully living and making the most of the time could be acts of wisdom. Not living to avoid risk, but, as Christ did, lean

into some risk and use the system to reestablish the inherent value of something that normally would have been lost, undervalued, forsaken even.

Next in verse 16 is the word time. While reading it repeatedly, I hear the rhythm of that rock song by the Chambers Brothers, “Time has come today!” And while that song echoes with the ticking of that clock and the chorus cries out TIME, it stands for a certain ethos and era of protest and movements of the 60s. And that is the “time” that is meant in verse 16. For Bible scholars, the Greek word is K-A-I-R-O-S. Kairos differs from kronos or chronological time because it takes in the more spiritual intentions. Kairos relates to the season, the state of the times, the Zeitgeist if you will. It can be when things come to a head or reach their crisis point, but is related to the “right, critical or opportune moment” for action that is in God’s will. Which makes sense here that those with wisdom understand or discern WHEN to act, to intervene, to DO something about it.

So, when I hear the word kairos and I think about you, TriCon church, my actual immediate thoughts go to the history of your town -- of Concord. And while Marquita and I drove down those streets and passed Walden Pond and stopped by the Robbins House, while we kayaked in the marshes off the river, I meditated over the times I used to teach the Transcendentalists to my sophomore classes. I recalled the truest conflict that I remember from studying the likes of Thoreau -- that is how to navigate the tensions between self-reliant preservation and civil disobedience. What inspires a person to believe in themselves and their own way of life and all of a sudden stand up proactively (against the state) in defense of another person’s life. And then for someone like Thoreau to be a part of the Underground Railroad. Now it may seem like a leap to you. But I’ve really been caught up in this imagery for months. I’ve been wondering what it felt like to be in Concord, Massachusetts in 1850.

In the middle of 1850, one walking circumspectly could scarcely have ignored or missed the consequences of the Fugitive Slave Law in returning freed slaves, if caught, back down South. And one would have to decide their own relationship to the government as Thoreau so thoughtfully wrote about. I must admit that this part of the sermon is less to you individually than it is to you as a collective community, an entire church. Because I’ve been praying about how collective wise action inspired by the Spirit makes things possible. The Underground Railroad is such an example. It was a strategic initiative that was inherently made of diverse people that addressed a major sin of this nation. And when I think, even list the issues of our present day, I tend to think back on movements like the Underground Railroad for inspiration.

It occurs to me that movements like that take time to develop. Not unlike the Jesus Movement or the American Civil Rights movement, American abolition took time to mature. The ethos of a town would have to evolve over some years. A town of educated people who read lots of books and supported locally sourced food and who were adjacent to progressive thoughts by various colleges and universities, raising their children. A town within a state populated by a great number of freed Black people. I was surprised to learn there were just over 9,000 freed African Americans living in the entire state of Massachusetts in 1850 and 600 more in 10 years time.¹ So a pretty progressive space.

What I've been wondering is what was it like inside of folx like Walden and Thoreau and all these people whose names are on placards around town that made them fight so hard for Black people, indigenous people, and Mexican people. I wondered whether it was because they lived around free Black and indigenous people. I think there's something to that. I think it might burn more within you when you know and go to the market even worship with different kinds of people and somehow their rights are violated. I think I'd respond differently. They are less of an idea; their humanity is palpable and personal. It seems like your environment would help inform your kairos and even your redeeming. Loving different people makes you care about different things.

In this moment, I don't have every privilege for sure, but I do recognize there are plenty I do have. When I go to churches now, I check to see how the sound system works for those hard of hearing or with hearing aids. I want to know how clear it is to navigate a space if you don't speak English, and I have to challenge myself to ask how much has gender been a part of what decisions we just made. Would this have felt the same way to someone who is transgender or gender non conforming? I'm not including these examples to be “woke” or to sound trendy. I'm pointing them out because I believe that doing so is practicing wisdom according to this scripture -- to walk circumspectly, to discern and make the most of the times.

The complicated part of making the most of time -- working to leverage this season is paying closer attention to what's happening around us -- and discerning what actually to do. And the last word of verse 16 tells us where to look. But it's a word we often avoid, like when I spent a whole month not reading the newspaper or watching the news on TV. Some pretend evil doesn't even exist. But Ephesians calls on us to exercise our wisdom and act within our contextual moment BECAUSE these days are evil. And if you want to know

¹ University of Virginia Library. Geostat Historical Census Browser.
<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>
https://www.ncpedia.org/sites/default/files/census_stats_1790-1860.pdf

where to exercise wisdom it would be against evil. In this scripture evil is that which presses and harasses by labour, a hardship that brings toil or peril, that which causes pain and trouble. Where would I find evil in my neighborhood or county? Where there is pain.

In the metaphor of the Underground Railroad, I have been asking myself, what kind of conductor would I be? Like Harriet Tubman, who would I go back for? Which people near me are enslaved by something that I can help them with? In what way can my home, my job, even my peaceful disposition be a station along their journey? It seems to me here that wisdom is not mere intelligence, it is an intentional circumspect attention. I recognize how proximate I am to a particular need, and while it might not drive straight through my actual street, I find a way to make it a part of my story.

What am I preaching to you good people about? What do I believe God wants you to know? I am preaching so that you would start now and prepare the atmosphere of Concord for its next revolutionary movement in history. Restore the spirit of your ancestors and the history of the place in which you live. Your calling is different than the calling of other cities and states. But in your bones, in your spirit, across the street in Sleepy Hollow graveyard are the legacies of risk takers who were wise and who acted in ethical love and by the prompting of the Holy Spirit. They did not lose everything. They took enough risks to walk a Black man to the train so that he could not be forced to return to enslavement. Some of your ancestors kept Black people in their homes and helped them learn to read, fed them before the next station and gave them specific instructions about avoiding captivity. Some of your ancestors had free Black people as their neighbors.

Also, I want us to remember the vision that Pastor Bob has been directing the congregation in and name that environmental sustainability is one of the premiere issues of our time, clearly something that cannot be ignored. So too are all the issues that have tangled roots with it like climate refugees², climate migration, representation and the equitable supply of resources. Because environmental issues disproportionately impact people of color, it makes me pray about how you'll join that part of the fight too.

TriCon, I am inspired by the love I felt by being in relationship with your congregation. I am impressed by the close knit nature of your community and the beauty of your neighborhoods and bike trails. I'm encouraged by how you galvanize your resources for those in need AND I am also moved by the unction of the Holy Spirit to ask you ***what additional wisdom can you exercise in these evil days?*** When I see you I do not see ordinary people. I've met some spirited, brilliant, engaging folx -- former educators, movers and

² “Ecologically displaced person” is the more respectful and acceptable term (apologies).

shakers. While walking around your town and your church, at the edge of this pandemic, I sense that you are in the perfect kairos moment to ramp up your ministry to engage the evil days. In the words of my mentor Sarah Drummond, “The church itself is a response. Its very existence is a response to God’s call, and God’s call changes over time. Ministers’ role is to guide a community in interpreting God’s imagination for creation’s future. This means there is no ‘normal’ to get back to. We can only move forward.”³

As such a minister, I ask, what would it take for Concord to have the highest number of Black-owned businesses in a Boston suburb, or the first funded farm for indigenous land owners? Could it become a leading sanctuary church in the area who anticipated the growing number of climate refugees⁴ on the move northward? While formalized and legal enslavement doesn’t exist in Concord as it did in 1850, what could you be doing to diminish the hold of sex trafficking in the city of Boston? You surely have questions in your own heart to ask too.

Today’s scripture is related to wisdom and to urgency. It beckons its listeners to consider what the now is. Just as Elijah was called to something next and unknown, your now is calling. It is a time to get your feet dusty while wearing a mask, while imbued with power from on high. It’s time to put on your snowsuit and go out in the storm. It’s time for the collaborative labor of the Trinity and TriCon working together. The time has come today for us to all make the most of right now. While days are evil, God’s power “at work within us is able to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine.”⁵ In Jesus’ name.

Amen.

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³ <https://sbdrummond.medium.com/>

⁴ Again, “ecologically displaced person” is the more respectful and acceptable term (apologies).

⁵ Ephesians 3:20