

Pentecost13 (proper 15B)-2018-Being Careful to Live Wisely

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Ephesians 5:51-58

Being Careful to Live Wisely

I go to the mall and I am surrounded by stuff I don't need and people who are searching for something they can't identify. The "stuff" in the mall is primarily made by poor, desperate people who subsidize the actual cost of their product through their sweat labor, inhumanly long working hours, and dehumanizing living conditions where they have almost no health care and few rules that protect them or the environment that we all share. Meanwhile the material used to make these things that we don't actually need but think we do, soon winds up in landfills.

All of this is happening as we rapidly use up the world's natural resources, pollute our water and poison the air. Poison air increases the earth's temperature that then heats the world's oceans leading to rising sea levels, and this creates powerful storms in one place and devastating drought in another. Fires spring up throughout the western United States, Canada and Greece to name a few places on the globe. We hear that many parts of the world are experiencing record breaking heat. If we accept that evil is violence, then we are treating other vulnerable people and the earth violently even though it is our only home. And so we can say with the writer of Ephesians, yes, "the days are evil."

This is the context in which Jesus-followers carefully discern how to live non-violently in these days that are evil. It's not a question of good versus evil, of being "in" versus being "out" or of "us" versus "them." No; it's being "wise" versus being "unwise" as we wait in faith for Jesus to return. If we are wise, we will make the most of our time while we wait.

The writer wants the Ephesians to live from what they know is coming in the future not just what is happening now. They have been given a picture in their imagination, a vision, on what God has done already and will do in the future. This God-given picture is so nurturing, so nonviolent and so generous that it shapes how they think, feel and live now. The writer of Ephesians, who is probably a disciple of Paul rather than Paul himself, (we say that because he expresses himself differently than Paul would) wants to provide some structure for them as they explore this new way of life constructed in view of the coming future. How do we live now knowing what we know and how does it relate to how we used to live before we knew about God's generosity and nonviolence?

Remember, these are people somewhat new to the process of rethinking everything from a point of view that is ahead of them rather than behind them. They are used to thinking of God as wrathful, jealous and threatening and had built their lives to accommodate this view. Now

they discover they had been totally wrong, much to their joy. This, by the way, is why James Alison named one of his best books “The Joy of Being wrong.” If the foundation they have been building on was false, how do they build on a new, wildly beneficent and benevolent foundation? The writer is giving them some tips.

“So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” In this world so full of foolishness, how do we steer around it; how do we refrain from participating in it ourselves? I think about this a lot. For example, for me it is foolish to engage in extreme sports that I view as a desperate attempt to defy or thwart death by courting it. Yes, we feel exhilarated when we win but loosing is so terribly dire. I wonder if there is not a better way to find excitement and ensure one’s being and aliveness particularly when we have already been given an identity as the children of God. That’s really the only identity we need. Maybe in some special cases extreme sport is the will of the Lord but not for me.

At this point I thought I would write on “knowing the will of the Lord” and I suppose I could by pointing to Jesus who shows us the will of the Lord. But there is that problem of translation and application to our life and times. For example, is watching daytime television the will of the Lord? For me, right now, I don’t think it is. I think my Lord wants me doing other things. But what if I am in pain, can’t do much of anything and want distraction or what if I am bored as I iron clothes or prepare lunch? Then, maybe it is the will of the Lord.

Maybe this is me wearing a hair shirt, I don’t know, but I struggle even with extensive air travel in this time of global warming. I think about our burning up fossil fuels that it took millions of years to store away in the earth, and then suddenly, in the last 200 years, we burn them and inject their by-products directly into the air. It seems logical to me that the earth would be dramatically changed by that sudden influx of carbon. Our biologists, oceanographers, meteorologists, climate scientists, philosophers and most theologians of merit are all saying the same thing. I don’t like having to say this and I doubt myself in saying it since I am sensitive to what I think other people think, but the objective evidence is everywhere. What we are doing is evil because it shows violence toward the earth and we are all both implicated and will experience the consequences. Yes, we are forgiven already but our children and grandchildren and children after that will suffer for the way we have chosen to live.

So what is the will of the Lord? If air travel is to honor and enhance relationships, spreading calm and peace in the world, coming to know our neighbor and learning to respect them more, does that change the calculation? What about when these polluting planes carry vital medicine to people in desperate need? I don’t have answers but I do have questions on how we live in these days that are evil. I want us to consider these things and allow our thinking to influence our behavior.

We mentioned the mall and the futility of that. But we do need a few clothes and buying gifts to enhance relationship, showing the recipient they are loved, can be the will of the Lord. All I am saying is everything like this takes discernment.

Next tip: “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.” I looked up “debauchery” and here is the definition: “Extreme indulgence in sensual pleasure.” Think, “Bachelor in Paradise” with alcohol flowing, bikinis, bulging muscles, gossip, backbiting, and rivalry all in the name of looking for true love. The myth seems to be that true love can be found in sensual pleasure as though that were the glue that held relationships together. That’s not likely to last through the next day’s hangover.

So we have a prohibition “Do not get drunk with wine” but it doesn’t end there. The writer suggests something better than drunkenness that takes its place, “but be filled with the Spirit.” Spirit, that God-grounded, reality embracing sense that all is well and rivalry and violence between humans has been overcome by Christ who is beyond us all. In the Spirit we feel transcendence at the cellular level, awareness more deeply satisfying than any false transcendence drunkenness can induce. Plus, there’s no hangover.

So how do we call forth this Spirit-high so as to not fall into despair and its symptom, drunkenness? The writer answers, “be filled with the Spirit (big S singular, not spirits) as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, (notice this singing is done in community) singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, (think Aretha Franklin who lifted the spirits of a whole generation and particularly of a downtrodden race) giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We are back to living in view of what has already happened and the much-more that is yet to come; that “much-more” that it is the glory of God to give us when the time is right and Jesus returns, not to destroy us but to love us all. When our lives are guided and animated from the future, we can’t help but to live in hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.