

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost • August 16, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Ephesians 5:15-21

"Walking by Faith: Walking Wise"

We're going to do something a little different today. If you've been following these "Walking by Faith" messages, you know that each one has looked at the epistle lesson for the day and how it connects to St. Paul's statement that "we walk by faith, not by sight" as we live in Christians in this world. But there's so much going on in our epistle lesson today, we need to walk through the whole passage, verse by verse. Here in Ephesians 5:15-21, God's Word gives us clear instruction in walking by faith: He tells us the "**what**" and then lays out the "**how**." Take a look:

"Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise..." So what is wisdom? It seems like everyone can agree that wisdom is a "good thing." In the worldly sense, wisdom is most often the *application* of knowledge. It's not merely an acquaintance with facts, but **an understanding that shapes how you act**. You can be smart without being wise. In many ways, the same is true for real wisdom, the kind that the apostle is writing about here. Godly wisdom comes as a gift through faith. In Scripture, wisdom is often personified as a woman such as we see in today's first lesson, from Proverbs 9. We see there that wisdom is strong, wealthy, and honorable. Wisdom isn't trying to hide. She sends out messengers to call the people to the feast she has prepared, seeking to share what is hers with those who follow in her way. But what is her way? How does God define wisdom? A few verses beyond the end of our reading in Proverbs, we learn that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." When Paul encourages us to "walk as wise," he's reminding us of the One who is at the center of all our living: our God. **To walk wise means to follow a path of holiness in our actions, to make choices that are pleasing to God.** So know that we've established an understanding of what it is, how then might we walk wise?

"... making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." You don't have to look very far to see that wisdom isn't alone in calling people to follow. As you read through Scripture, you'll see wisdom and folly put into contrast, markedly so in the Proverbs. Folly, like wisdom, is calling out for people to follow in her path; however, unlike wisdom, folly promises things are not even hers to give – things that aren't real. Folly does not look to build up the foolish; instead, she breaks them down, leaving them even more foolish than when they began to follow her. Understanding this, and hearing for ourselves the voices calling us to follow in the world around us, we can appreciate what Paul means when he writes that "the days are evil." In the Greek of the New Testament, those first few words in this segment of the passage, translated as "making the best use of" time, can also mean "redeeming" or "buying back." That's what we as Christians do as we walk wise – we "buy back" the time by appreciating that time which has been given to us. Thinking on this, though, we're tempted to fall into the trap of believing that we need to make an accounting for every hour (or minute!) of the day, setting a detailed schedule for living. That's not what the apostle is encouraging us to do! Rather, he is drawing a distinction between making a plan to use the time we've been given and living in sloth and aimlessness. As Christians, as those who would walk wise, we are not to wander aimlessly through life, being tossed about by whatever currents would move us, moved by any voice that would call out for us to follow. Instead, we follow the voice of wisdom: the plan and direction that God has for us that we discern through His Word. And we can hear that call of wisdom even more clearly in the gathering of believers that is the Church. Making the best use of the time might be setting aside a time for rest, a time for work, a time for recreation. As we seek to discern God's will, remember that wisdom relates to the choices we would make, the course of action we would choose. This doesn't mean that we're trying to see the future, going out and consulting oracles and crystal balls. We're looking to make choices that are pleasing to God, choices that are informed by that wisdom that comes from faith. We can turn to our fellow Christians for aid when making such choices, as they can help us to see the way of folly and the way of wisdom in our current situation, helping us as we look together to God's Word.

“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery...” Some people would look at this passage and infer that God forbids the use of alcohol. As Lutherans, we disagree! Wine, like other good gifts from God, can be abused, and some people should refrain from it to avoid the risk of addiction. So what’s the point that Paul is making here? Think of it this way: In the course of history, how many truly **good** decisions have been made while drunk? Therein lays the problem with much wine. Walking wise means maintaining our ability to discern, and getting drunk equates to giving up that ability – it’s a throwing away of that which God has entrusted to us, the wisdom that has been entrusted to our care. It is, as the apostle notes, a kind of debauchery. But what’s “debauchery?” That’s not a word that we use all that often. It could also be translated as “wasting” or “squandering.” We’d be squandering the time that we have – that time of which we are to make the best use, for the days are evil. Anything that would strip away our ability to make a wise choice should be avoided.

“... but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart...” In our songs and hymns this day and each weekend, we sing out God’s praise, right? But how often in your day-to-day living do you find yourself moved to melody? Maybe in the friendly confines of the shower, where nobody can hear you, but never in public, you say? We’re not talking about bursting into song at the supermarket, as if you were in a Hollywood musical. This a song which can be in the heart, a song that acknowledges the many good things that God has done in our lives, a song that is a response of praise. That’s the nature of the faith that God has given us: it is faith that responds. So, as you go into the week ahead, even though it might be an unfamiliar practice, think about a song that you might sing – it could be a favorite hymn or something you compose spontaneously – a song that reflects the work that God has done and continues to do in your life.

“... giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...” Here, the apostle encourages us to adopt a posture of thankfulness if we hope to walk wise. In this week just past, I’ve spent time with fellow Christians at a funeral, in the hospital, at home, sharing time with them in their grief, in their hope, in their thanksgiving. We don’t give thanks for the suffering we endure, though we do thank God for His work even in the midst of our suffering. We give thanks for God’s continued presence and the fellowship He gives us through other Christians – think back to some of the other aspects of “walking by faith” that we’ve explored this summer to see the many ways in which God cares for us. This posture of thankfulness is founded in Christ, who has made all this possible through his death and resurrection. He is the feast to which wisdom calls us in Proverbs 9, the feast which Jesus himself says will bring life which does not end in death.

Now, there’s one more verse I’d like to look at beyond what’s printed in our bulletins, because it completes the thought of this segment of Ephesians 5: *“...submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”* There’s wisdom in submission, wisdom in voluntarily holding back. As Americans, we might chafe at this “submission” thing. We’re supposed to have what we want and do what we want whenever we want! But our perspective is skewed. Here, as we learn to walk wise, God refocuses our vision, calling us to submit to other Christians in service, in consolation – even in just *listening* to the cares and concerns of our fellow fallen and forgiven believers – and gathering together to be fed by the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ.

Our reading from Ephesians has given us things to think about as people who would walk wise. And as we walk out into the world today, remember that our Christian faith isn’t just about waiting for “the world to come,” waiting for things that seem far off: it’s very much about walking in the here-and-now! Our faith guides us in walking wise as we live, seeking God’s direction and making choices – acting – on that holy path that God has set before us.

As we continue together as a people who walk by faith, may we be always guided by Christ, the very wisdom of God.

Amen.