

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

August 16, 2009
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Ephesians 5:15-20

New Life Advice

“Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise,”
(Eph. 5:15a)

Wisdom is a virtue that is at the same time elusive while it is highly desired. Wisdom while it can be achieved, it cannot be obtained by any simple formula or set of directions. Many among our forebears in history bear witness to this enigmatic nature of wisdom. Nicholas of Cusa in the 15th century wrote, “Wisdom is shouting in the streets. It is simply not enough for those seeking wisdom merely to read about it. Wisdom must be discovered. . . . You will not find wisdom in your books for it is not of your books, but of the books of our God.” And before that, in the 11th century, Peter Abelard wrote, “The first key to wisdom is assiduous and frequent questioning. For by doubting we come to enquiry and by enquiry we arrive at the truth.” (both quoted in “Wisdom” *The Living Pulpit*, Jul. - Sept. 2000, p. 33). There’s a humility implied in wisdom that at times can be daunting, leading Mark Twain to say, “Better to keep your mouth shut and appear stupid, than to open it and remove all doubt.” (*ibid.* p. 32) We want to be wise. We want to have that ability to make choices and decisions that are truly honorable and in the best interest of not just ourselves but of our communities and the world in which we live. We have seen others who have such wisdom and we want to be like them. But how to get there. Oh, how to get there.

In the church we recognize that wisdom is one of the results of spiritual growth. We have witnessed in those who we admire among our fellow Christians and seek to follow a maturity of faith that is manifested in winsome wisdom. Billy Graham who is one such contemporary figure for many has said that “Knowledge is horizontal, Wisdom is vertical—it comes down from above.” (*ibid.* p. 34) So we can study wisdom, we can observe wisdom and we can learn about wisdom, but they’re not the path to wisdom. Wisdom is a gift from God—a gift that is out there in our futures waiting for us to discover as we gain in spiritual growth.

An emphasis on spiritual growth is one of the priorities that emerged within the last year in this church as part of our Journey of Renewal. Through a series of information gathering events such as Sunday school classes and town hall meetings, along with a congregational survey, it is clear that there is a desire among a large majority of the congregation for deepening faith and growing spiritually. In adopting the recommendations that came out of the Journey of Renewal, the session, our church’s governing body, has adopted a 2-year action plan that seeks to achieve goals related to the 4 themes around which the ministry of this church will be focused –those 4 themes being Learning Love, Sharing Faith, Serving People and Celebrating God.

To that end, this week a group of elders is meeting to begin the process of determining how best we can organize our efforts toward these goals. Another of the Journey of Renewal recommendations is that there be a work group or committee that is focused on spiritual growth. This group will work together to develop and expand the opportunities in the congregation for those wanting to pursue spiritual growth. There are all sorts of possibilities that might emerge: Sunday school classes, Bible studies, book

groups, small group studies, and special events. By the way, anyone interested in being part of this planning is more than welcome to join in. Please let Jody or me, or any member of the session know of your interest. And do stay tuned for more to come as we gear up and move from summer mode to fall mode in the next few weeks.

In the meantime, it occurred to me as I came upon this Bible passage from the book of Ephesians that there are some pithy words and ideas that pertain directly to this goal of spiritual growth leading to spiritual maturity—the wisdom of which we’ve been speaking!

The first thing is that there is no time to waste. “. . . making the most of the time, because the days are evil.” (Eph. 5:16) Interestingly, the “evil” days in which this letter to the Ephesians was written nearly 2000 years ago are still among us. So even if there was a sense of urgency at the time of this letter’s writing that the time ahead remaining was limited, we can in our own day see that if we’re to make any significant impact in our world today, that time is precious and must be used to the fullest. For the truth is that there are needs all around us, in our community, in our nation and around the world—needs that result from the evil of greed and domination, the evil of neglect and abuse, and the evil of every other kind of injustice. Part of our journey toward spiritual growth is the working to overcome the evils around us in our world.

There are many folks in our congregation who would testify that this working for justice, this work of mission, is indeed an experience in which faith is deepened and made more mature. One such group is the deacons of our church. Each year our deacons faithfully raise money in a variety of ways in order to provide help and assistance to people in need in our own community. In particular, the deacons have adopted two of our rural elementary schools—one in Gallatin Gateway, the other Monforton, just east of 4 Corners. Through their efforts the kids in these schools have adequate outerwear for the cold Montana winters. And access to health care is also made available more readily through nursing services that are provided with funds from the deacons. It is a joy to talk with those deacons who have been most directly involved in these projects. They will tell you that it is a faith-filled experience to see and witness the positive difference that is being made in the lives of these precious children of our valley. To talk with these deacons is to witness spiritual growth in them.

The other group where this kind of spiritual growth can be witnessed is in the youth of our church, who each year participate in a mission trip somewhere in the world. This year more than 20 youth and adults traveled to Skagway, Alaska where they partnered with the Presbyterian church there to provide a vacation Bible school for the children of that community. Last year our youth mission trip traveled to the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in southeast Montana where they led a vacation Bible school for the children in Lame Deer. Each year when the youth return from their mission trip, their faces are alight with faith and joy as they share their experiences with us. The evidence of spiritual growth in the youth and their leaders is palpable. Coincidentally, this morning a number of the youth who traveled to Alaska are at the Madison Valley Presbyterian Church in Ennis leading worship there and sharing their experiences of growth in faith and ministry.

So the words to the Ephesians to make the most of our time are reminders to us to keep at it, to not only keep up with what we’ve been doing but to do even more. And in so doing we will experience spiritual growth.

Secondly, as we are to make the most of our time, we're also told not to be foolish and in particular "not to get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery. . . ." (Eph. 5:18a) Now a literal, narrow reading of this would seem to be focusing on one particular act—that of drinking too much alcohol to the point of inebriation. While this particular "foolishness" is admonished, it would be too narrow to limit it to that. More likely it is a metaphor for the church, being warned to avoid those activities and actions that will distract from the task of making the best use of the time in these evil days. In the case of the church today, it would be losing the focus of what the church is called to be. For example, the church that begins to see as its primary purpose to be the taking care of itself, as opposed to the reaching out to those outside, welcoming them in and inviting them to join us in discipleship. In these challenging economic times, we may find that as we attempt to do more with less, we'll lose our outward orientation and turn inward. And when that happens our spiritual growth will be stifled if not snuffed out completely.

And it's at this point in the Ephesians' letter that we get some guidance for keeping focus, ". . . 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, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Eph. 5:18b-20) This advice can be summed up in a single word. It's a word that is at the core of every mature Christian who is on the way to wisdom. That single word is gratitude. An attitude of gratitude is a goal toward which everyone on a spiritual growth trajectory is focused.

Twentieth-century Scottish theologian John Baillie writes, "True Christians are those who never for a moment forget what God has done for them in Christ, and whose whole comportment and whole activity have their root in the sentiment of gratitude." (alt. p. 157, *Worth Repeating: More than 5000 Classic and Contemporary Quotes*, © 2003 by Bob Kelly, ed., Kregel Academic & Professional)

And there's one last gem within this short few verses. The gratitude that we express to God is expressed not just individually in a solitary way, but rather among ourselves, within the community of faith, in the company of others who are on this spiritual journey toward maturity and wisdom.

Contemporary theologian Richard F. Ward writes, "Imagine the church's vocation as a great series of interpretive images set in stained glass and put on display. Within that display we see an image found in this little blip of a text from Ephesians. Here is the church 'filled with the Spirit' (v. 18). And 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." (Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3, Bartlett and Taylor, editors, 2009 Westminster John Knox Press., p. 355)

May our hearts in this place be so grateful as we worship God in gratitude. Now there's some wisdom!