

August 19, 2018 • Rev. Keri Olsen Paget's Farewell • Blessing of the Backpacks • Faith in Action Sunday

BIND OUR HEARTS IN LOVE – SUMMER SERMON SERIES

“Lives That Make for Peace”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Ephesians 5:15-20

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, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but 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.

Today's sermon continues our Summer Sermon Series from the Letter to the Ephesians. We have been exploring this Scripture's many teachings for the church about how to be a community worthy of the gospel, lessons essential both to the church and to our larger community. We've considered what it means to be rooted and grounded in love, a love that shines through our every word and action and creates a new community of love. Amidst the crazy, vociferous times in which we live, we've asked ourselves how we, as Christians, might bring a calm, grounded kindness and thoughtfulness into the mix, putting ourselves in our neighbor's shoes, searching for and speaking for the greater good. We've examined how we might find our voice, rooted and grounded in the love of God, all the while remembering that words matter and words have consequences.

We experienced how the sacrament of Holy Communion creates a new unity in Christ that surpasses all humanly created categories, boundaries, and boxes. Today, we'll look within and we'll look to God to form within ourselves lives that make for peace.

If you were listening carefully just now to the verses Ron read for us this morning, you may be wondering how in the world this gets us to any sort of peace. At the very least, they don't sound much like fun. You might be wondering how, on the one hand, Christians are supposed to be rather "buttoned-up" and restrained while at the same time be filled with the Spirit and the music of God?

It helps to know that while the church community in Ephesus was like us in some ways—in their diversity and internal conflicts—they were much different in another. The early church interpreted Jesus' teachings to mean that he would very soon be coming back to restore all things to God. For them, the "end times" were imminent. Any day, any hour... so they lived in a kind of hyper-sensitivity AND with a sense while they strove to be holy, the world they lived in was evil, as we heard in today's passage. They understood their calling as doing battle with the wicked ways of the world in order to preserve their holiness and be ready for Christ's return.

As the centuries have gone forward since those times, we've obviously re-adjusted our clocks. We teach that Jesus will come again but with a much more expansive timeline. Our task is not so much to be at war with the ways of the world as to discern how to live in and for and with the world, witnessing to God's love and compassion, justice and peace.

Today's Scripture invites us to "make the most of the time." Another translation puts it: "to redeem the time." How do we redeem and make holy the time God has gifted to us?

Various translations of verse 15 help us get it: live wisely, make every minute count, don't waste a moment, make good use of every opportunity you have, use every chance you have for doing good, pay attention.

In conversation with many of you in the last couple weeks, you've mentioned a variety of life's significant moments that bring this home. Most of us have the sense that summer has sped by. Where did it go? How could it possibly be almost September? Can't believe that we're back into soccer practice and the start of school!

Others have commented on those poignant moments of transition that bring home just how precious every moment of this life is. Reflections on a child finishing preschool and starting Kindergarten. A son or daughter going off to college and a whole new chapter beginning for the whole family. An elderly parent nearing the end of life.

All these moments that cause us to stop and take stock, to revel in memories, wonder about the future, and vow to live in the moment—to redeem the time.

"I want to cherish every remaining moment I have with my father," one daughter said. "I want to live in the moment in a spirit of gratitude."

What a beautiful way of redeeming the time.

Now, how do we take this even further, to redeem those times that are more overwhelming than what we might call the ordinary turning points in a life? What if we're challenged to redeem something even bigger, harder, times when we do come up against the real evil of this world and must find ways to heal and move forward?

Our Scripture passage today points to what at first might seem like an unlikely source of renewal and joy, or at least one we might not consider. Music. Did you hear that in what Ron read? "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."

What we're seeing here is a picture of people in worship, people gathered together to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. The music itself is from the heart and the music forms our hearts. The music of worship opens up channels for the Spirit to come in and shape and reshape our hearts and lives.

We are invited to redeem the time by becoming people of singing hearts. It is the music that offers us healing and restores our strength. It is the music that connects us to God, a God who is in covenant with us, always calling us into a future with hope.

I heard an amazing story about the healing and restorative power of music this week. It was six months ago that the school shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, claimed 17 lives and wounded 17 others. This week, the students are going back to school. To help them heal and prepare for school, 80 have been involved in a group therapy camp this summer to help them process their trauma. The camp, led by trained therapists, is all about painting, skits, and music. Called "Camp Shine," the counselors have observed how the group activities, including singing, song-writing, and recording, have helped with the students' depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress syndrome.

As one counselor observed: "it's clear they've known pain greater than what any child should experience." The camp's creative arts therapy is designed to help them reconnect with their bodies, their dreams, each other, to sing and feel joy and happiness, to have fun and smile again. One participant said: "It's healing, relaxing and calming and helps take our minds off things."

The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians knew what the Parkland students and their arts therapists know. There are ways to move through this life with mindfulness, intentionality and wisdom. There are ways to move through and beyond even the most difficult and painful challenges. There are ways to heal and restore our hearts and dreams. There are ways to embrace the things that make for peace, cherishing every moment. There are ways to redeem the time.

A great man of peace and peace-making died on Friday: Kofi Annan, General Secretary of the United Nations from 1997-2006 and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001.

Annan, who worked tirelessly for peace and reconciliation even through his retirement, dedicating his life to redeeming the time, was born in Ghana. He began his extensive education attending a Methodist boarding school in Cape Coast. He credited his Methodist teachers and Scripture with instilling in him the principles that guided his life and work. This soft-spoken, highly effective global statesman and diplomat once stated that at the school, he was "privileged to have teachers who understood the value of knowledge infused with purpose. They taught me, in the spirit of faith, that suffering anywhere concerns people anywhere." And so, he later said: "We need to keep hope alive and strive to do better... to live is to choose. But to choose well, you must know who you are and what you stand for, where you want to go and why you want to get there."

Annan once observed that "peace is never a perfect achievement," because it follows war, suffering and hatred. "It follows the worst that [humans] can do." And then he added, in words that surely the Parkland students, teachers, parents and counselors understand only too well: "to restore humanity from such hell requires the patience of ages, the will to see light when all is dark and hope when all is bleak." It is truly the work of "those who shall run and not be weary... those who shall walk and not faint."

And so, as we bless our backpacks this morning, we pray God to bless students and teachers everywhere, to bless peacemakers and all who strive to redeem the time, and to fill each backpack with purpose, with vision, with peace, with the life-giving Spirit of God, and with a song.

And may we ever be a peaceable people of singing hearts and unquenchable hope.

AMEN

Notes:

Paul V. Marshall in *Feasting on the Word Year B, Vol. 3*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 2009.

Jessica Bakeman. "To Cope With Shooting, Parkland Students Use Art, Music Therapy." NPR, Aug. 16, 2018.

Kofi Annan quotes compiled from various sources.