

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | John 6:51–58

Date | August 15, 2021



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

'Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time'. Amen.

It is one of the ironies of life that it takes us a lifetime to work out what really matters about the lives we lead, yet when we finally discover these deeper truths there is not as much life left as we would like there to be to live into them. Given this inconvenient realization, Paul's maxim that we hear in Ephesians today, to 'make the most' of our time, offers wisdom that Solomon himself would be proud of. Solomon, the king who asks the Lord not for certainties over the fickle masters of health, longevity and power, but for insight that he might make the most of the life entrusted to him by living for others, is a high watermark of wisdom. Grant me, O God, understanding 'that I might discern what is right', is Solomon's request of the Lord. Help me see what I cannot see alone. He is the opposite of the narcissistic leader, naming his limits from the very outset of his reign as king.

The problem with Solomon, though, is that having been established as one who confesses the limits of his leadership, the divine gift of wisdom ironically sets him apart from others, becoming even from the very mouth of God, the exemplar bar none of the godly king. As the Lord declares, 'no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you'. Thus, Solomon is both the paragon of wisdom yet so much the perfection of that quality that we can never hope to attain it ourselves. 'Make the most of your time', if only you can figure out how, is the message the scriptures seem to offer.

Seen as such, wisdom would not be a gift but a trial, a test of how much we measure up against an impossibly high standard. Yet this not how Paul sees the Christian life. For Paul, knowing our limits is a helpful corrective to what he saw in his day as one of the core obstacles in the way of the nascent church communities he had founded. The letters to the church in Corinth, for instance, expend a great deal of hot air about the significance of what the Greeks called gnosis, which can translated as knowledge or more accurately knowledge that is derived from wisdom. For the Corinthians, gnosis was something they believed they already had within their reach and Paul's so-called 'foolish' gospel of Christ crucified and of the power of vulnerability was an incursion the Corinthians were not keen to admit. From their hellenistic worldview, they already had the capacity to attain the mind of the ideal form of life, not as a gift from beyond themselves but as the necessary consequence of their pursuit of perfection.

For Paul, though, nothing could be further from the truth he sought to proclaim in the good news he knew in Christ Jesus. His concern was not their minds' superior grasp of wisdom, but the mind of Christ, a gift that our hands can receive when we learn first to empty them of all those things we choose to cling onto instead. To imitate Christ in what Paul calls in Philippians the kenosis of the self, is to lay down our desire for control. Presented as such, the path to wisdom is not one of spiritual superiority but of letting go, of allowing our egos to recede sufficiently enough to feel the gentle touch of the God who will not bruise the reed, nor quench the dimly burning wick. Seen through the lens of wisdom, to make the most of our time is not to fill up our days with all the achievements that our power can muster, but to empty ourselves out enough to receive the gift of grace. It is not about what we can do, but the kind of person we can become.

So how do we become empty? How do we learn to say that we are already enough, all that God has ever needed or wanted? Well, part of that answer is in how we come to see ourselves through the eyes of others.

The life of the church these past seventeen months of this pandemic has no doubt been one of significant adaptation and adjustment. Some learned to grow fond of worshiping online, reaping the benefits of church on the couch at home, or in bed, or wherever you might be. Some are still worshiping with us that way today. Most of us have had one experience or another on Zoom, and have learned to add 'you're on mute' to the lexicon of our everyday conversation. We have shot endless numbers of videos, and gazed at one another in little boxes on a screen, silently thinking things we had never got to ask ourselves before, like 'I wonder where they got that painting, or that lamp', or in the case of some the kids who discovered early on how to manipulate a video call image, 'what are those bunnies doing dancing above his head?'

For all of its variety of new experiences, and for all of the talk of virtual church being the future for faith communities, for me it is only the embodied church that offers the kind of proximity, the touch, the presence, the feel of a community of people who not only choose to show up at the same place and time together, but who choose to live life together close in enough to draw each other out.

As we celebrate coming back to our block today we do so not as if the concerns of this pandemic are somehow all behind us, but acknowledging that there is a deeper strength that we are gifted by one another in being together. As we look to the program year ahead, to ministries familiar and new, we look at ways by which each of us might grow deeper, might come to see others more truly, might learn to know ourselves more honestly. This community is a living testament to the truth that people are made to become the abundantly alive human beings that God intends all of us to be, in the company of others. We need others to draw out of us the fullness that by ourselves we will never see. For we cannot fill our own cups, no matter how much the world around us might ask us to. As the great liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, says, 'we drink from our own wells', from one another's waters of life, not because we take what we want from others but because in the life we share in Christ we learn to draw deep from the well of our own lives to replenish the waters of others.

This church can teach you that. This place, that calls refugees 'brother' and 'sister', can help you to see so much more full a picture of human dignity than any news story or political slant on immigration and asylum could ever do, because here you can grow in friendship with those whose lives will enlarge your own. This community, that bears witness to the deep courage of men on their way to hope making the journey out of addiction and loss can offer you partners for your own journey to wholeness, and the discovery that when we strip away all the superficial trappings of our comfortable lives we are the same beloved children of God beneath it all. This parish, that calls you to cross the divides of race, and wealth and neighborhood not merely to come here on a Sunday morning but on every morning, gifts to you the opening to receive a fullness of life that otherwise you might never know, not because of our achievements or standing as a church, but because here we invoke the name of the God who calls us deep to deep.

As we make our way out of this pandemic, with some trepidation and concern for the welfare of others, I invite you not merely to come back to the block, I welcome you to see even more fully the opening that is present to you here to make the most of the time we have to live ever deeper into that call we hear in the voice of God's love. God alone knows the kind of bread you have to offer the hungers of this world. Yet we already know that each of us is all we need to live a life for others. Make the most of your time and of this indescribable gift of life.