

Sunday, August 19 + 13th Sunday after Pentecost

[Ephesians 5:15-20](#)

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI

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In the workplace, as in life, transparency and trust go hand in hand. The keys to transparency are communication and radical honesty. It is said that leaders should live by one simple rule: “If you *can* tell your employees something, then do it.”

I want you to be open and honest with me about our lives together. In turn, I want to be transparent with you, particularly about the larger church, as best I know it. Holy Trinity is not an island, but part of a larger organism consisting of about 150 congregations we call the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin, which is in turn part of a larger organism known as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America that is made up of about 9,250 individual parishes. Especially in our synod, whatever happens to any of us affects all of us. We need to talk about things that happen in a way that helps us examine our lives together.

Which brings me to this past week’s news. Many of you saw the news a few days ago that the pastor of an ELCA congregation in Fort Atkinson was arrested for embezzling church funds. While regrettable, this episode might have been buried in the next news cycle if it weren’t for the tragic story just five years ago about our previous bishop, before Bishop Mary, who struck and killed a jogger while driving drunk. He is still

in prison. People in the general public who connect these two dots may well be thinking, “Those ELCA Lutherans – what is wrong with them?”

What is wrong with them? That is God’s question to ask and answer. The relevant question is, what is wrong with us? The result of the poor choices these two people made stand out because they were rock stars on the local stage. The bishop was widely, almost fanatically well loved, and truly a man of the people. The pastor in Fort Atkinson was an engaging preacher, extremely popular among parishioners and colleagues, and high on the radar for the next bishop.

But if we are really being transparent, radically honest, shouldn’t our names be making headlines as well? Doesn’t each of us do things that set back, to some degree, God’s plan for the redemption of all creation through the person and work of Jesus Christ? Each of you can write your own headlines, but some of mine might be, “Wife gets wrapped up in her job and fails to spend quality time with her husband.” Or, “Mother assumes her kids know she loves them, so fails to send really cool care packages like other moms do.” Or, in one of my former lives, “Daughter fails to complete her doctoral dissertation, much to her father’s dismay, who had pinned all his hopes on her achieving this goal.”

In the shadow of our own headlines, it is to us that the author of the letter of the Ephesians directs a profound commentary in Chapter 5, especially verses 15 and 16: “Be

careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.”

Putting aside the last phrase for now, what is meant here by wisdom, living as wise people? It means conducting ourselves in a way that is not only characterized by knowledge, but by skill in living as members of the body of Christ. We develop this skill through our experience in making choices.

And what governs this experience? I think comes down to a single litmus test: Is a given choice representative of the resurrection of God in Jesus Christ? Does a given choice represent a God who loves us so much that he would send his Son into human history to take upon himself the consequence of the entire weight of human sin? Or does that choice allow the devil to put another notch in his belt? That is, is the decision you are about to make life-draining, or life-giving? Does it give death, or life, the upper hand?

Going back to our two Lutheran colleagues, the bishop’s choice to drink heavily and then get in the car to drive to a church event was life-draining because it put himself and others at great risk. The pastor’s choice to divert money from church funds into his personal account was life-draining because it deprived the church of the ability to use that money for God’s purposes.

We say, “Well, we would never do those things.” But have we really been living wisely and making the most of the time? The Greek word translated as “making,” in live

wisely, “marking the most of the time,” actually means “redeeming,” as in a great bargain, with a connotation of force and urgency. Snapping up a great item on sale – you’ve got to get there and get it done. Making the most of the time means that there is no time to waste. We must put what we have to the best possible use in doing what is good and right and true.

It helps in understanding this to remember that the New Testament was written in the high expectation of Jesus’ imminent return. Believers thought it might happen anytime. Evil was still rampant in what they thought were the last days – thus the reference at the end of the quote to how the days are evil – so some people were determined to live a life worthy of their calling as people of God.

Two thousand years later, there is still this same urgency. Perhaps not so much in the expectation that Christ will descend from the clouds at any moment, although that could happen, but more because we know we are the hands and feet and ears and mouth of Christ in the world, and only through us can God’s kingdom become a reality on earth. Evil is still rampant. Jesus needs us, and there is no time to waste.

So choose wisely. Do not be foolish, Ephesians 5 verse 17 tells us—following whims and desires that are expressions of the self turned inward, and not toward God—but always be asking God what is God’s will, and then listening for the answer.

Do not get drunk with wine, verse 18 says—that is, drinking to excess (some drink is OK; after all, Martin Luther was a consummate beer drinker and his wife Katie was a

master brewer, and concerning wine--as good friend of mine likes to say,--“Jesus liked wine”)—do not drink to excess, but be filled and lifted by the Holy Spirit. God has given us our lives, our possessions, and our special spiritual gifts to use in service of God’s desire for the redemption of all creation. We honor these gifts when we live as if our life actually matters. If we spend our days numbed to all these gifts by anesthetics such as greed, power, and self-centeredness, we cannot experience life “filled with the Spirit.”

Back to transparency. I acknowledge that, as your pastor, I may at times seem too eager. In my previous call I was accused, in a nice way, of always trying to do too much. I do send too many emails, and to those of you who are frequent recipients, I apologize. But I was thinking about this, and I came to the conclusion that it’s not just eagerness but perhaps the same desire we find here in Ephesians--that there is really no time to waste. We don’t know what is around the corner, or what tomorrow holds, or what things might be like a year from now. All we can do is to serve God with glad and joyful hearts to the very best of our abilities, right now. And we serve with a song on our lips: We have in our reading those exquisite last two verses, “as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts,²⁰ giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.””

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