



“The Way of Wisdom”

Ephesians 5:15-20

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Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

For the past several weeks, our national public discourse has been marked by nasty incivility. Town meetings, intended to be forums for the exchange of information, have been taken over by very angry people shouting at their representatives and, apparently, unwilling to listen to them.

Wild accusations have accompanied name-calling as some elected leaders are accused of being Nazis, communists or idiots. I cannot escape the images of people, faces twisted by anger or sheer hate, yelling, even screaming, at members of Congress.

It's nothing new, of course, but it seems that incivility is on the rise in the past decade or so. And, it needs to be said, that incivility seems to be non-partisan in character.

As usual, the issue doesn't seem to be the issue. Health care is the supposed subject of the town meetings but the topic gets lost beneath the collective rage. Nobody seems interested in listening or participating in a civil conversation about a very important subject.

And, as always, shouting matches, finger-pointing, accusations and name-calling are counter-productive. They do not address the issue and make no attempt to solve the problem under discussion.

Gloria once worked for a supervisor who had a creative solution to criticism and complaints. His policy was that he would listen to the complaint if you brought three solutions to the problem. The policy reduced the number of complaints and lowered the tone of the conversation. Some people, it seems, aren't interested in solving problems. They'd rather complain.

Our current incivility is a heightened form of an old fallacy. It's called *ad hominem* arguing. It's easier to attack a person than it is to deal reasonably with their ideas. It's simply bad logic and is seldom recognized for what it is. Mr. X has a plan for a crisis. I think Mr. X is a bad man (for whatever reason). Therefore, Mr. X's idea is bad. The conclusion doesn't fit the logic.

It's just as fallacious to argue in the reverse. Politician X has a plan. She is a good person whom I support. Therefore her idea is a good one.

Again, such distorted discourse is counterproductive. It never discusses the idea on its merits. And such incivility strikes at the heart of what it means to be a democracy. Democracy is supposed to feature reasoned discourse, careful listening to all sides of an issue and decision-making based on such reasoned conversation.

Anyone with any experience in conflict resolution knows the secret of peacemaking is getting both sides of a conflict to state their opponent's position fairly, honestly and

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convincingly. It doesn't mean agreeing; it does mean listening carefully and understanding the other side.

Our devolution into shouting match town meetings leaves decision-making to the display of raw power and irrational forces rather than decision-making based on informed listening and debate. We pride ourselves on our modern sensibilities and culture, but we don't seem to be making much progress acting in a civilized fashion.

This is no mere political issue; it is a matter of profound interest to Christians and the Christian Church. Listen to wisdom more than four centuries old: John Calvin, who unfortunately is one of the most vilified dead white males of our time, was a wise man far ahead of his time.

Calvin argued that God has placed a moral law deep in all humanity. Therefore, nations should be governed by the principle of equity: justice tempered by friendly love...a general civility of which believers and unbelievers, along with pagans, are capable. Nearly five centuries later, we still have trouble rendering equity and justice in a civil manner. It seems Christian behavior is little better than that of the population at large.

My point is that incivility in public discourse is unwise and dangerous. It is not wise for a nation and certainly not wise for congregations of Christians. Civility is a matter for church and state – it is our business.

Our Epistle Lesson offers an alternative way – a way of wisdom that can cool tempers, open minds and soften hearts. We would do well to listen, and to lower the volume of political discourse.

The Lesson is deep in the second half of the letter to the church at Ephesus. The subject of the entire second half of the letter is ethics. How should Christians – and the Christian community – live in light of what God has done in Jesus Christ, the subject of the first half of the letter.

The argument is simple: God's behavior should be the way we behave. What God has done in Christ (the great imperative) calls for, indeed it creates, an ethical response (the Christian imperative). If God's outlook is centered in and controlled by grace, certain divine behavior is the consequence. God overlooks human sin and rebellion and is willing to forgive us unconditionally and irrevocably. "God's mercy triumphs over God's judgment." That's how the New Testament author, James, puts it. If so, and we are people who've been captured by that grace, then our outlook and consequent behavior should be the same. We should treat each other – and our neighbors – the way God treats us and them. God's grace creates a community that is a place that embodies God's gracious character.

So, the Apostle argues, since God is one, the community that bears God's name should live in essential unity. God respects each human on earth, puts up with us no matter what, offers mercy we don't deserve, and desires the entire creation to be reconciled. So should we. God redeems the lost, and that is our work. God creates, promotes and preserves shalom; so should we.

There is, on this violent, conflict-ridden planet, a new way of thinking and living, and it is profoundly ethical. At its heart, Christian faith is about putting lives, people and communities back together.

Therefore, the epistle continues, always tell each other the truth. Why? It's deeper than a commandment. We ought to tell the truth because, the letter argues, we are members of each other. To be Christian is to tether ourselves to a community of faith that embodies the life of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

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The argument continues: we are called to share our lives and resources with one another because we belong to each other. Curb your anger because we know angry outbursts hurt people – and we are part of each other. Christians guard their language because we know words hurt, even destroy. Our speech should intend to build people up, not tear them down.

We are family. So last, but not least, we forgive each other because God forgives. To know and experience the love and forgiveness of God creates the capacity in us to do the same.

So, think about God's grace and think about your behavior - a lot!

Then we turn to our text, Ephesians 5:15-20. Such ethical/theological thinking is essentially practical. It is a way of wisdom. Our text begins forthrightly, "Be wise. Don't be foolish." Weigh your behavior, your language, and your relationships carefully in the light of God's behavior, language and relationships. To do so is to live wisely.

Being wise is not the same thing as being smart or educated. For centuries we've thought that education is a matter of getting the right information into people's heads. We believe in education by information. That is an illusion. Highly educated, very smart people do very stupid things that damage and destroy themselves and others.

The church, especially our Reformed tradition, bought that illusion. For generations we thought if we put the right information into our heads and our children's heads, the consequences would be faith and right living. Generations of confirmation students memorized and mastered reams of information and promptly left the faith and the church. The information by itself made little, if any, difference.

We've been too interested in information rather than formation. The shape of our character and our souls must match the information, or we've wasted our time and our minds. For the church to do its work in us or in our children, we have to create systems that shape lives – and minds.

It's a matter of wisdom – good living. So, that said, Ephesians 5 offers some basic wisdom for living that will shape our souls and form our character.

Be formed in this way, the text begins. "Make the most of every opportunity." The older translations put it this way, "Redeem the time." In the flow of time in our lives come opportunities large and small. Don't waste them. Take advantage of each opportunity life offers.

When moments of beauty occur, stop and enjoy them. People who love us are each a divine opportunity that shapes our inner person. Don't waste those people.

Too many people reach middle age and regret they didn't spend enough time with their spouses, their family, their friends. Too busy in the pursuit of our own dreams, we miss the greatest opportunities God offers. I don't know anyone who reached old age and wished they'd spent more time at work and less with their family. No one wishes they'd worked harder and taken less leisure time.

Sundays are one of those divine opportunities. What we do here each week is much more than a mere formality, a necessary routine to pay our dues to God. What we do here is a divine and powerful matter. My favorite Call to Worship is borrowed from Fourth Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. "There is something about this time and place that can neither be given nor received in any other time or any other place." Then, I like to add: "for this is the Lord's Day. We are in the Lord's House. We are the Lord's people, and we've gathered to meet the Lord and hear the Lord's Word."

Take advantage of every opportunity. It's a matter of wisdom to keep our eyes and ears open so we don't miss the gifts God scatters across our lives.

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A second critical piece of wisdom follows: “Understand God’s will” and conform to it. For instance, how does God say we should treat our neighbors, including our enemies? How does God treat those same people?

I’ve told you a story that bears repeating. When I was a seminary student, our Dean was attacked in a journal and called everything from a heretic to a dangerous deceiver. Several of us showed the article to the Dean and asked him to respond. We wanted some theological fireworks!

Instead, he said, “The first thing I want to say about Carl (the author of the article) is that he is my brother in Christ.” Then the Dean calmly and patiently responded to the article. Very wise. Quiet. Christ-like and most effective.

The third bit of wisdom: “Don’t get drunk; that is dissipation. Instead be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Good advice. Never be under the power of any destructive force. About ten things can happen when we’re drunk – and all of them are bad.

Instead, live under the power of God’s life force. Let God fill your life and empower your speech and guard your behavior. About a thousand things can happen under the influence of God’s Spirit – and all of them are good.

Fourth, put a song in your heart and a hymn in your mind. There is something powerful and formative to Christian worship. It doesn’t matter what form worship takes, formal, liturgical, or free-flowing; we are formed by the practice of worship. If we pay attention and if we submit to the forms of worship, we enter into eternity and invite God to form our inner being.

When I was a graduate student a professor in the department was my nemesis – or at least I thought so. I heard he’d objected to my acceptance into the program. He was a harsh critic of my work – and everyone’s work. He had a reputation for leaving powder burns on the back of his chair during seminars. Some of the fire of those eruptions landed on me – and they hurt. I worked hard to gain his approval and wondered if I would ever get through the program.

I didn’t go to chapel much, but one day I decided to go. The chapel was about the size of this room and filled with students. Somehow, I ended up sitting next to my professor. Ironic, I thought.

The worship leader invited us to a responsive reading from the Psalms. We used the pew Bibles. There was one Bible available. My professor opened to the Psalm and offered the Bible to me to share in the reading. We sat and joined voices in worship.

Next came a hymn. One hymnal was available. I opened it and offered to him to share in the singing. We stood and joined voices in the praise of God.

Despite myself, my heart melted, and my life changed. I did win his approval but it had nothing to do with that chapel service – that salvation was by works alone!! But I changed and that man became, perhaps, the most influential teacher in my intellectual and theological formation. I disagreed with him then and now on some large matters but I know this: he is my brother in Christ and that must be the beginning of the conversation.

In times like these, be wise. Don’t be foolish. Large matters hang in the balance.

Amen.