

“Making the Most of the Time”

a sermon by

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Text: “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time” (Ephesians 5: 15-16).

In 1789 George Washington, the President of the United States, declared the first National Day of Thanksgiving. Decades later, in the midst of a bloody Civil War President Abraham Lincoln revived the practice of what is now an annual tradition of issuing a presidential proclamation of Thanksgiving. In that proclamation President Lincoln asked God “to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purpose to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.”

Today we are a nation that is divided in a very different way than in 1863. The election of 2004 has reminded us again that the United States is now divided in a nation into “red” and “blue” states. There are many issues that trouble us today: the debate about moral values; the ongoing war in Iraq that is draining the human and economic resources of our country and inflicting enormous damage on the Iraqi people; the concern about economy in this country and the mounting deficits; health care and education--just to name a few.

Yet, troubling as these may be, these are not the things that trouble me the most. What is most troubling to me is that I detect a sense of weariness in many Americans today. I wonder if we have lost the sense of faith and confidence in our ability to face the problems that are before us or whether the divisions that separate us will destroy us.

I.

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Ephesus, encourages his readers to live as “children of light” and not as “children of darkness.” He had every reason to be concerned about the welfare of those people. Ephesus was one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire. It was a port city on the Aegean Sea and to it came people from every imaginable race, religion, and temperament in the Roman Empire. He calls them to be “imitators of God” and to live in love, as Christ has loved them.

Paul did not need to be lectured about diversity. He understood diversity. Ephesus was as diverse a city as one could imagine. He urged them to remember the unity that was theirs in Christ. He encouraged them to make the most of the time and that is something we need to hear this morning.

II.

First, if we are going to make the most of these times, we are going to have to recover a sense of the “common good.” One of the sharpest debates with which the founders of this country had to wrestle was the conflict between “individual interests” and the “common good.” The framers of the constitution sought to give individuals room to pursue their own interests, but always held that the interest of the individuals had to be checked by the common good. Much of the malaise that affects the church and our nation today is the result of a loss of willingness of individuals to subvert their own personal self-interest to the interest of society as a whole. We have spawned a generation of “narcissists” for whom the “me first” principle takes special precedence over everything else. All about us are the single-issue groups, the one-issue candidates, and the people who are so preoccupied with their own self-fulfillment that they cannot see that their attitude is a path to self-destruction. Dean Rusk, the former Secretary of State, once told about growing up in Cherokee County, Georgia. His family owned a small farm in a small farming community. They had rigged up a system of communication between each of farms through a crude telephone system. One short ring and three long ones meant that the phone was for you. One short ring and two long rings meant that the call was for someone else, but who could always listen in on other conversation. Three long rings meant there was an

emergency and everyone was supposed to come to the phone. Now, in Cherokee County, Mr. Rusk said there were only three things that could constitute an emergency: one was a made dog, the second a fire, and the third thing that constituted an emergency in that small county was if an agent of the federal government was one someone's property. "We didn't need them," said Rusk. "We didn't look for Washington to solve our problems."

But where are the statesmen today? Where are our citizens? But where are those who start by thinking of ourselves as members of a great republic whose own interests, whether banking, industry, religion or the law cannot succeed, unless we succeed together? If we are going to make the most of these times, we are going to have to recover the common good.

III.

Then, too, if we are going to make the most of these times, we are going to have to recover a sense of toleration. Many of the people who came to the shores of this nation came to rid themselves of the imposition of the state upon religion. One of the most dangerous impulses in our political life is the tendency of people to demonize those who do not agree with them. To accuse President Bush of being stupid or to argue that everyone who voted for the President is ignorant does not serve the common good in any way. In the same way, to argue that Senator Kerry was a left-wing communist supporter is equally repulsive.

This lack of toleration is particularly evident in the debate about "moral values." There are numerous groups in our country today who claim that there is only one position that Christians can take on such complex issues as abortion, way, and homosexuality. In truth, there are a number of political, social, and economic issues on which Christian do not agree. We must understand that pluralism is not necessarily evil. Each of us has something to contribute, but each of us needs to be warned against pretending to have more truth than we actually possess. Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote on the problem of "Having and Not Having the Truth." He made the point that as Christians we believe that we have the truth in Jesus Christ. But there is another sense in which we do not have the truth. We are creatures not the creator. We are also sinners, which means we perceive the truth through the eyes of our own self-interest. For that reason we need to listen and respect those who do not always agree with us.

Central to the notion of toleration is the idea that we are all bound to one another and, if one falls, all are in danger of falling. Martin Niemoller was a German pastor who, along with others, opposed the advent of Hitler in Germany. Because he spoke out against the Nazis, he was placed in prison. After his release he observed: "The Nazis came for the communists and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and because I wasn't a Jew, I didn't speak out." "Then," he said, "they came for the Trade Unionists, and because I wasn't a Trade Unionist, I did not speak up." "Then," he said, "they came for me . . . and by that time there was no one to speak up for anyone."

Then, finally, if we are going to make the most of the time, we re going to have to recover a notion of the providence of God. On this Thanksgiving Day it is appropriate to remember that

the notion of providence was important to those Christian groups who settled this country. They did not believe that it was a matter of chance that they found themselves on the shore of this country. Rather they believed that the presence and power of God had made it possible for them to be there. Henry Miller, the New England historian, has written, "Their errand was not a scouting expedition. It was an essential maneuver in the drama of Christendom."

Apart from the notion of the God who works for good for those who love him, we are all without much real hope. One of the most tense and terrifying times for this nation occurred during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. The Americans had learned that the Soviets had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba and a young American President, John Kennedy, had ordered the Soviets to remove the missiles. It was a classic standoff. The Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, remembered that moment well. The nation was on red alert. All our missiles were prepared to strike against Russian targets; all our B-52's were in the air. During this tense time, when our nation was very close to nuclear war, Rusk remembered a catechism question he had been taught as a child in a Presbyterian Church. "What is man's chief end?" Suddenly, it occurred to him that this was an operation question before the entire world. "What is life all about? What is its meaning?" That is a basic human question and it is one that for us is rooted in our belief that we are not part of a blind cosmos hurtling through space without any direction or guidance, but that the basic truth about our lives is that we are created by God, redeemed by our Lord Jesus Christ, and that nothing can separate us from his love.

I, for one, do not believe that God has placed us on this planet to be destroyed by terrorists who fly airplanes into buildings? I do not believe that God has placed us here to destroy the air we breathe nor the water we drink. Our faith tells us something more. It tells that we are called to be the children of God.

I believe that we are going to have to recover the basic elements of hope and confidence that are critical to our faith, as well as our society.

In his biography of Winston Churchill entitled *Alone: 1932-1940*, William Manchester describes that fateful night in 1940 when Winston Churchill was summoned to Buckingham Palace by King George VI and asked to form a national government to lead the British people against the German Army and the threat of invasion. That night Churchill wrote in his diary he felt as if he were "walking with Destiny, and all my past life has been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial." He had spent years in the House of Commons in a political wilderness. And now, everything he had predicted had come true.

Once when asked if he had been the one to give England the courage to stand against its oppressors, Churchill argued that he was not the lion. It was, he said, the people who were the lion. His job was only to give the roar.

This is the kind of confidence and hope that we need to recover for today. It is not confidence and hope that is built on neither our own inherent goodness, nor even our own military might. It is confidence that is built on providence and a beneficent God.

