

# “Redeeming the Times”

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, because the days are evil (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, 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 of the full employment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.”

Today, we are a nation that is divided in a very different way than in 1863. The War in Iraq has created a great division in this country. Last week on the floor of the House of Representatives a member of the house accused representative John Murtha, a distinguished congressman, veteran of the Viet Nam War, and winner of two purple hearts of being a “coward” for arguing for an immediate pullout of our troops in Iraq.

But it isn't just the war that is troubling our nation today. There are other problems as well: the growing national deficit, health care, energy, and global warming as well as the capacity of the nation to respond to natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.

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 "children of darkness." He had every reason to be concerned about the welfare of these people. Ephesus was one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire. It was a port city on the Aegean Sea and people came to it 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 have 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 time and that is something we need to hear this morning.

## II.

First, if we are going to redeem these times, we are going to have to recover a sense of the "common good." One of the sharpest debates in which the founders of this nation engaged was the conflict between "individual interests," and the "common good." The framers of our 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 a result of a loss of willingness on the part of individuals to subvert their own self-interests to those of society as a whole.

Several days ago I had a conversation with Parks Helms, the Chairman of the Mecklenburg County Commissioners, in which he lamented the struggle that the county was experiencing over the failure of the school bonds to pass. To be sure, there are fast growing areas in our county that need new schools and more space in existing schools. But, there are inner city schools that have great needs as well, and if we do not attend to the needs of the poor in the city, we will all reap the whirlwind of the hopelessness and despair that can rob us of everything we have built.

But where are the Statesmen? Where are the Citizens? Where are those who start by thinking of ourselves as members of a great city whose interests, whether business, banking, industry, religion or the law, cannot succeed unless we succeed together?

When Nelson Mandela was arrested by white South Africans he told the court, “Ending apartheid is a cause for which I would gladly give the rest of my life and a purpose for which I will gladly die.” Mandela spent twenty-seven years in prison and saw the end of apartheid, and became the first black president of South Africa.

I wonder how many of us can say that there is any cause for which we would gladly give the rest of our lives for, much less something we would die for?

### III.

Then, too, if we are going to redeem the times, we are going to have to recover a sense of toleration. Many people who came to the shores of this nation did so 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.

This lack of toleration is evident in the debate about “moral values.” There are numerous groups in this country today who claim that there is only one position that Christians can take on such complex issues as abortion, war, and homosexuality. In truth, there are a number of political, social, and economic issues on which Christians 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 about pretending to have more truth than in fact we possess. Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote about the problem of “Having and Not Having the Truth.” 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 and not the creator. We are also sinners, which means that we perceive the truth through the eyes of our self-interest. For that reason we are called to listen and to respect those who do not agree with us.

That is at least part of the tragedy of the Sunni suicide bombers in the Mid East in recent weeks. At the start of the Ramadan season, a Sunni Muslim suicide bomber walked into a mosque in Hilla, Iraq, and blew himself up in the middle of a funeral. At the close of Ramada, a Sunni Muslim suicide bomber walked into a Radisson Hotel in Amman, Jordan, and blew himself up in the middle of a wedding reception. The problem, of course, is that you cannot build a nation on suicide bombing. It is an abomination. A civilization that does not delegitimize suicide bombings against any innocent civilian is itself committing suicide.

That is why the Sunni world should read the words of Martin Niemoller, a German pastor imprisoned for his opposition to the Nazis.

Niemoller wrote, “First they came for the communists and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a communist. Then they came for the Jews and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the Catholics and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant. Then 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.”

#### IV.

Then, finally, if we are to redeem the times in which we find ourselves today, we will need to recover a notion of the sovereignty of God. Yesterday's *Wall Street Journal* published a portion of the diary of William Bradford that was written in 1620, as the first pilgrims to come to this shore celebrated their first Thanksgiving. They knew it was not easy. They were in a wilderness filled with wild beasts and dangerous natives. But they had a notion that they were part of a divine drama. They did not think it was a matter of chance that they had come to these shores. Rather, they had a sense of the divine will and providence leading them. As Perry Miller, a historian, has written, "Their errand was not a scouting expedition. It was an essential movement in the drama of Christendom.

In his *Memoirs*, former Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, wrote about the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. It was the closest that the world has ever come to nuclear war. The issue at hand was the fact that the Soviets had placed nuclear weapons in Cuba, just ninety miles from our shore. A young American President, John F. Kennedy, had ordered the Soviets to remove the missiles. There was a standoff and both sides were prepared for war. Rusk remembers that all the B-52's had been scrambled and the nation was on red alert, which meant we were poised for a nuclear strike and retaliation. During those tense moments when our nation was poised on the verge of nuclear war, Rusk wrote that he remembered the words of the Shorter Catechism that he had learned as a boy in a Presbyterian church in Cherokee County Georgia. The first question of the catechism is: "What is man's chief end?" For Rusk that question became an operative. What is life all about? Why are we here?

That is a basic human question and it is rooted in our conviction that our lives are created by God, redeemed by our Lord Jesus Christ, and that nothing can separate us from that 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 or suicide bombers who blow up people at weddings and funerals. I do not believe that God has placed us here to destroy the air we breathe or the water we drink.

So the elements of confidence and hope, essential to the democratic process, are the elements that desperately need to be recovered for today. Suppose, for example, that in those dark days of World War II in 1940 that President Franklin Roosevelt had gone on the radio in one of his famous fireside chats and said to the American people: "Friends, the end is at hand for us as Americans. The Germans are moving quickly across North Africa under the brilliant leadership of Field Marshall Rommel, the Soviets have been defeated at Stalingrad, and all of Europe is now prostrate before Hitler and the Third Reich." Suppose President Roosevelt had done this. By many contemporary standards of media credibility he would have been telling the truth, for all these things were true.

But it would have been a lie. For Churchill and Roosevelt had not given up hope. They had the confidence in the Allied Cause and they believed in their heart of hearts that Hitler would be defeated.

It is this confidence and hope that must be recovered for our own time, if we are to redeem the times. It is not confidence, however, that is built on our own inherent goodness, nor even our military might. It is confidence that is built on a provident and beneficent God, and that confidence will not fail us.

Amen!