

# “Redeeming the Times”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina

July 2, 2006

**Text: “Be careful 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).**

As we come to this Fourth of July celebration on Tuesday, it is apparent that we are living in a difficult time. According to a recent poll, Americans are deeply divided on the issue of the War in Iraq. In the United States Senate this past week Senators debated on whether to require a withdrawal of our troops in Iraq. There have been recent successes in Iraq, but there are grave questions as to how long the war will continue and if it is winnable.

There are other concerns that trouble us today. We are concerned about global environment and more and more scientists warn about the effects of global warming. Coupled with that concern is the inordinate worry that many Americans have about high gasoline prices. The rising price of crude oil has several disastrous effects on us. On the one hand, it increases the price of gasoline at the pump. On the other hand, the excessive price of crude oil fuels the wealth of some of the most resourceful regions in the world, including Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and Iran.

But as troubling as these things may be, they are not the most troubling. The most troubling concern that many of us have today is whether we have the courage, the will, and the inner resources to meet the problems that face us.

When the late novelist Walker Percy was asked what concerned him most about the future of America, he answered:

“Probably the fear of seeing America, with all its great strength and beauty and freedom...gradually subside into decay through default and be defeated, not by the communist movement...but from within by weariness, boredom, cynicism, greed, and in the end, helplessness before its great problems.”

One of the “Seven Deadly Sins” of the ancient church was the sin of Acedia, or sloth. Acedia is not just laziness. It is more than that. It is a hatred of things that are good. In his 1978 Harvard Commencement Address, the Soviet Dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn warned of what he called “the spiritual exhaustion of the West”:

“In the United States the difficulties are not a Minotaur or a dragon--not imprisonment, hard labor, death, government harassment and censorship, but cupidity, boredom, sloppiness, indifference. Not the acts of a mighty all pervading repressive government, but the failure of a listless public to make use of the freedom that is its birthright.”

## I.

This morning we have read from Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus. It is a letter that is notable for a number of reasons. In this letter Paul refers to God’s eternal purposes in calling to himself a chosen people. In this letter he speaks of the church as “the body of Christ” and “the bride of Christ” as well.

The Book of Ephesians, like so many of Paul’s letters, falls into two main parts. The first three chapters are doctrinal in nature. In them Paul sets out the body of his thought. In chapters four and five Paul turns, as is his custom, to ethical concerns.

In Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus the Apostle sounds a mighty call to the church to resist the pressure of the society around it. He calls for authentic love and not impurity. He urges them to be imitators of Christ. He rejoins them to walk not in darkness but in light. He encourages them to show real wisdom and not be led into folly. In verse 16 he insists that the days are evil and urges them to redeem the times.

## II.

If we are to succeed in redeeming the times, we must first of all recover a sense of humility. Several months ago *The New York Times* printed an essay by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., entitled “Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr,” in which Schlesinger noted that in recent years there has been a notable absence in our public discourse of some of the things for which Niebuhr stood. Niebuhr understood the mixed and ambivalent character of human nature--creative impulses mixed with destructive impulses, regard for others overruled by excessive self-regard. That is why Niebuhr warned in his own day against the notion of the “American Innocence”--the idea that we are good and everyone else was evil. Niebuhr was wary of politicians and preachers who

seemed too easily to know the will of God. He knew how powerful the instincts of self-interest really are as well as the power of self-deception. For Niebuhr the model statesman for Presidents was Abraham Lincoln. In his Second Inaugural Address Lincoln noted that both the North and South read the same Bible and prayed to the same God. Each invoked God's aid against the other. Lincoln was very sensitive about claiming that God was on one side or the other. He reminded the nation of Jesus' words: "Judge not that you be not judged." He urged the North to fight on with "firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right." He reminded the nation "The Almighty has His own purposes." As Niebuhr points out, "the role of religion should be inculcate, not a sense of infallibility, but of humility."

### III.

Then, too, if we are going to "redeem the times," we are going to have to discover a sense of courage that is not afraid to challenge in the name of Christ the culture in which we live today. Recently I came across a book by Mark Galli entitled *Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of an Untamable God*. In this book the author reminds his audience that Jesus never defined success in a way that is coherent to those of us in the Twenty First Century. He told his disciples that he would go to Jerusalem, be confronted by the religious and political leaders of his day, be crucified, die and be raised again. This was a scandal to Peter and to the other disciples. They had something else in mind. It was not lost on them that Jesus had started out with twelve disciples, but they watched the crowds grow. They had seen crowds swelling to over five thousand people coming to hear this man talk. To be sure, Jesus had challenged the authorities, but given his popularity, they could not lay a hand on him. The disciples thought that when Jesus spoke about the coming Kingdom of God, he was talking about politics, and Peter and the disciples envisioned that one day they would be cabinet members in Jesus' future administration. Power. Glory. Success.

Today there is a lot of talk about the successful churches in America, "mega churches"--some of whom attract fifteen to twenty thousand people to worship on a single Sunday. Some of these churches are pastored by individuals who are celebrities, who sell millions of books promoting happiness, wealth, and self-fulfillment. But that is not what I hear Jesus saying in the New Testament.

In his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer distinguishes between what he calls "cheap grace" and "costly grace." "Cheap grace" for Bonhoeffer is religion that costs us nothing. It is forgiveness without repentance, baptism without church discipline, grace without discipleship, without the cross, without Jesus Christ living and incarnate.

"Costly grace," on the other hand, is the gospel that has to be sought for again and again, the gift that must be asked for, and the door at which we must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a person his life, and it is grace because it gives the only true life. It is costly because it cost the life of God's son and it reminds us that "we were bought with a price."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, however, did not just talk about it. He embodied it with his life. In the early 1930's he was a student in New York City, when Adolph Hitler came to power. More

and more Bonhoeffer felt he needed to return to his native Germany and oppose the forces of National Socialism. His friends in this country begged him not to return to Germany. They knew it was too dangerous. They urged Bonhoeffer to stay in this country and then return to help Germany after the war. But Bonhoeffer did not believe that he could stand with Germany after the war if he did not stand with them during the war. So he returned to his native country and joined the resistance forces. He was part of a plot to assassinate Hitler. For his role in that plot he was arrested by the S.S. and on April 9, 1945, he was hanged by the S.S. at the concentration camp in Flossenburg, just two days before the camp was liberated by the allies.

You see, Bonhoeffer didn't think it was enough to believe in Jesus, he was willing to follow him as well.

The same was true with a young graduate of Princeton Seminary by the name of James Reeb. In 1963 when Martin Luther King, Jr. issued a call for people to come to Birmingham, Alabama, to help register black people to vote in that state, James Reeb answered the call. On his very first day in Birmingham he was killed by mob of angry white men. His death, according to Martin Luther King Jr., shocked an entire nation and was the occasion for the Congress and the President of the United States, Lyndon Johnson, to sign into law the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said "when Jesus calls a person, he calls that person to come and die," and that is exactly what Bonhoeffer and James Reeb did, and it is called courage.

#### IV.

Then, finally, if we are going to redeem the times in which we live, we are going to have to discover anew what it means to pursue the "common good." When the founders of this nation envisaged a new society, they deliberately balanced the rights of the individual over against the rights of society as a whole. They wanted to produce a society where individuals were free to pursue their own dreams, but individual rights had to be balanced by the rights of society as a whole.

Today we see a society in which "single issue" candidates and special interest groups are everywhere. We see people who are "pro life," "pro choice," and "pro war," "anti war." We see powerful lobbyists who work for the elderly, the rich, the unions, or what have you.

But where are the statesmen? Where are the bankers, the lawyers, the business leaders, and the ministers who are willing to suspend individual rights to promote the whole of the community? We have neighborhoods in Charlotte that are more dangerous than Baghdad. We have a school board that cannot even deal with each other in a civil way. How on earth do they expect to be able to ensure the education of our children?

In his 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech William Faulkner declared, "I decline to accept the end of moral man." Man will prevail because, as Faulkner said, he is alone among the creatures who has "a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

Today, we must in the same way, decline to accept the end of moral man. We must carry on the struggle for our children. We must push back hard against an age that is pushing hard against us.

We must redeem the times!

Amen!