**Homily for August 18th 2024 Ephesians 5:15-20 “Caution, Clarity, and Celebration”**

*Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Our text today comes to us from St. Paul’s writings to the church at Ephesus. Ah, Ephesus…one of the greatest cities of antiquity, one of the exemplary churches that Paul mentored and encouraged along, and one of the most complicated scenarios in which to embrace this new way of living that Jesus had come to impart. By forty years after Paul’s death *this church* is getting star billing in the writings of John and especially in the Book of Revelation, where he lauds them up and down about their stamina and endurance but then takes them to task for a lessening of their fervor and the friendliness of their fellowship. By the time John addresses them, they are a church out of balance, which is ironic, since Paul’s advice to them is laser-focused on remembering to keep things balanced.

We humans remember things in a variety of ways, and good writers and teachers and preachers keep that in mind. For example, one of the simplest effective memory strategies is to remember things in pairs. If you are good at this, life becomes one giant game of Concentration. But even if you are lousy at that game – which I am, for some reason – we all do pretty good with *some* memory pairs. Fill in the blanks for me here, if you would be so kind: salt and \_\_\_\_, peanut butter and \_\_\_\_\_, toast with cinnamon and \_\_\_\_\_. Good! It works with people too… Laurel and \_\_\_\_\_, Abbott and \_\_\_\_\_, Fred and \_\_\_\_\_. Excellent! What about name brands? Bausch and \_\_\_\_\_, Proctor and \_\_\_\_\_, or even Harley \_\_\_\_\_?

St. Paul was quite a successful writer, teacher, and preacher, so it offers no surprise that this pairing technique would be found in his arsenal. Today, in the closing section of his letter to that mighty church at Ephesus, he offers pairings designed to be remembered: mind and heart, wise and unwise, drunk with wine or inebriated with the Spirit, those kinds of pairs. And the one I want you to take home with you today is close to the title of the sermon: careful minds and celebrating hearts. Cautious, but also celebratory…those are our parameters today.

Thinking about this took me back to my childhood and one of my favorite playground activities: the teeter-totter. Joyful for sure, but only if you were careful, right? You didn’t want to ride with the bully who would leap off unexpectedly and send you crashing to the ground! The teeter-totter is a *magnificent* example of shifting balance and sharing power. And it, too, will be a guiding parameter for the next few minutes, as I assert that Life is meant to be like a teeter-totter, full of celebration but with some measure of caution, too. That is what St. Paul wants us to remember about our faith, the alternating use of caution and abandon, the mixture of carefulness and joyfulness.

He begins like this: *Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.* Paul locates our need for caution *outside of us* for a change. We are instructed to live carefully, not because we are wretched sinners teetering on the edge of disaster, but because the days are evil. The times in which we live – and this seems to be as true now as it was two thousand years ago – are fraught with peril, filled with bad outcomes awaiting our participation. But we can navigate this spiritual minefield by being careful how we live, being thoughtful about our choices, and not frittering away the time in ways that our slovenly world endlessly encourages. Wisdom, in this case, is making better choices than just grabbing the low-hanging fruit thrust at us by other humans. This ‘being careful how we live’ is linked forever to our minds, to our deductive process, to assessing the relative merits of things accurately and always with an eye to the will of God.

Since Ephesus was a Greek holding for much of its active life, we should raise the famous story of the risk of taking unsolicited gifts that comes to us in the legends about the Trojan Horse. Remember? Opening the gate to *that* gift had life-altering repercussions, and ever since, we have voiced the mildly racist comment, beware of Greeks bearing gifts. But Paul’s point is cleverer by far; he would say beware of gifts bearing Greeks! Be careful of the people your choices get you to open your door to, open your mind to, open your wallet to, for the days are evil. We can thank another great Greek, Aristotle, for reminding us that it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it. For heavens sake, we are Methodists here, thinking Christians, reasoning Christians, and we need not believe every idea peddled to us. Beware of gifts bearing Greeks! Beware of choices with unpublished outcomes.

So, one side of the teeter-totter is caution, carefulness, which is a *deductive* mental activity. Balancing it, though, is the *inductive* work of the heart, the emotional side of life that celebrates and loves and recognizes joy in all its forms. *We need both*, as humans and especially as Christians. Every Sunday we gather on Wesley’s playground, a man who would forever advocate for both personal piety and social action, a balance of mind and heart. That was his teeter-totter that we have inherited, and we play on it all the time! Which is to say that Paul is not out in left-field to suggest this balanced way, the way of head and heart, the way of caution and abandon, the way of taking care in order to be free, and the balance point, the sweet spot, is the clarity of thought and intention that we bring to the playground of life.

To say that attaining this balance is simple would be absurd. This balancing act defines our lives, for better or for worse. It is not just for country folks or city folks, secular folks or church folks, it is for *all* folks. We hear about it every day in its political dress: listen to these instigating words of James Wolcott: *I understand that one of the purposes of bipartisanship is to cram something difficult and necessary down the American people's gullets for which neither party has the fortitude to assume full responsibility. It's a way of turning a possible gangplank into a teeter-totter.* In every arena, seeking the balance, finding our way forward in evil days, these are not new challenges or problems likely to disappear anytime soon.

And so, Paul gives advice, advice to encourage and uplift us when the hard work of navigating the teeter-totter gets too tiring. He says: *Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything.* This advice is primarily *individual* in nature, for we all have different life needs to balance. He does not suggest we gather by the thousands to slay our personal dragons. Get yourselves through, he says, by singing to yourself, by making melody in your hearts, and by giving thanks all the time for everything. How this would differ from a mantra repeated by a Buddhist, or an affirmation sung by a Religious Scientist, or a rosary wordlessly whispered by a Roman Catholic I cannot really say. Whatever form we use, the advice is sound and time-tested, that the consciously engaged mind, dwelling on something uplifting and sublime, will merge with the heart’s desire for that goodness and bring peace within.

I close with an observation; that nearly all of us here either lived through the 1960’s, or know about them. And we know that the societal pendulum was really swinging wide back then! What was happening, I think, was that a lot of us were living pretty much in our heads, pretty much all the time, creating orderly, disciplined, dutiful lives. Some folks rebelled against that way of being, and promoted the life of the heart, the life of freedom and joyfulness, but they propped it up to unsustainable heights. It seems ironic all these decades later, but the squares and the hippies needed each other, for each were trying to ride the teeter-totter by themselves. At the end of the day, or in this case at the end of the sermon, real life, profound life, meaningful, fulfilling life will always be found when we achieve balance between our head and our hearts. Careful minds and celebratory hearts, that is the goal. Amen.