

Misshapen Pearl
Ephesians 5:15-20

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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.

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Ephesians 5:15-20

August 15, 2021

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

On a day such as this, when we have baptized young Rory Soricelli, welcomed back his sister Juniper, and hailed the return of their parents Rob and Tiffany, both of whom were integral to the music program of our church for so long, with Rob singing in the choir and Tiffany having served as a beloved Choir Director, we, of course, find today's scripture reading encouraging us to be filled with the Spirit, as we sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among ourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in our hearts, giving thanks to God and for everything that is our lives together in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. This, then, is the point of our lives together, is it not? To be filled with the Spirit of God and to respond to the gift of that spirit, celebrated today in Rory's baptism, (reminiscent of our own) with exuberant song and ebullient melody.

II.

However, also contained within today's scripture reading from Ephesians 5 is a counter point: to live not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of our time, because the days are evil; so we are not to live foolishly but, rather, to understand what the will of the Lord *really* is. As people of faith we often also fall prey to the common but erroneous assumption at work in society that these are two competing, divergent and disassociated claims which have been placed upon us: expressed most simply, the good of the spirit and the evil of the world. While it certainly is better to have a true and vivid sense of both the good and evil which abounds in the world and, especially, in being able to tell the difference (or, even, that there *is* such a difference) the mature faith we to which *we* strive demands a more nuanced understanding. Which, here at the Church on the Park, is our bread and butter.

III.

As I endeavor this morning to stretch *your* understanding of what is more often than not the over simplification we hope to avoid, please know that I, too, am being stretched by the illustration I have chosen to employ in an effort to elasticize the relationship between the evil and the good; especially, given

the more musically literate here among us, and with Rob, Tiffany, Bob, Matt and Jarrett being replete with musical training and education. Nonetheless, and as we all know, the journey of faith is not for the faint of heart.

Let us begin, then, by turning back the hands of time to the 17th and early 18th century to what is known as the Baroque period of Western Classical Music. Widely studied, performed and listened to, Baroque music forms a major portion of the “classical music” cannon; with the term “baroque” coming from the Portuguese word *barroco*, meaning “misshapen pearl.”

IV.

During the Baroque period, composers such as Bach, Vivaldi & Handel experimented with finding a fuller sound for each instrumental part (thus creating the orchestra), made changes in musical notation, and developed new instrumental playing techniques. Baroque music expanded the size, range, and complexity of instrumental performance, and also established the mixed vocal/instrumental forms of opera, cantata and oratorio as well as the instrumental forms of the solo concerto and sonata. The Baroque period found dense, complex polyphonic music in which multiple independent melody lines were performed simultaneously, serving to greatly expand musical expression and communication. In short, Baroque period was an absolute game-changer in the history of music.

V.

At the tail end of the Baroque period comes the Austrian composer, music theorist and pedagogue Johann Joseph Fux, In 1725, Fux publishes his seminal work “*Gradus ad Parnassum*” (or Ascent to Mount Parnassus) which includes, as the first section, an analysis of musical intervals as proportions between numbers, then, in the second section, introduces and elucidates the notion of “counterpoint”; which, mercifully, is our destination for this morning. Counterpoint is the relationship between two or more musical lines (or voices) which are harmonically interdependent yet independent in rhythm and melodic contour. Meaning, the parts rely on each other while, at the same time, wholly do their own, very different thing.

VI.

What I'd like to ask of us this morning, is to consider the relationship between the evil and the good in much the same way; that is, as counterpoints to each other. If we can manage to do so (and believe me, this is no small task) I believe it may prove to be a theological game-changer for us as we venture forth together in our own spiritual journeys.

I offer today's sermon from the vantage point of a generational arc. I have known Rob and Tiffany for many years, first as college students, then young professionals, then as the officiant at their marriage ceremony (and having imbibed a goodly number of whiskey sours at their wedding reception), then having had the privilege of baptizing big sister Juniper and, now, little brother Rory. I can tell you, it has been a wonderful view on a very remarkable journey; what a privilege, what a joy.

VII.

Last Saturday, I also had the privilege and joy of walking my own child down the aisle of this church as our daughter Nicole Potter married Christopher Melville, son of Sarah and Duncan. When Linda and I arrived here at the church, Nicole was 5 years old, and just weeks away from boarding the bus for kindergarten. I also baptized Nicole, and together we *all* watched and helped her to grow up in this church and congregation; many of you are still here among us, but, sadly, many more are not.

I can tell you, it has been a *very* long journey from that day standing hand in hand at the bus stop in the front of the manse, to standing arm in arm this week at the top of the aisle of this sanctuary. Much has happened over the course of those 23 years, which have seemingly flown by unabated. Years filled with joys, wonders and miracles, the greatest of which has been Nicole and Chris meeting and beginning to date in the 8th grade.

VIII.

However, there has also been a great deal of loss, sadness, hardship and death. Such is the journey through this world, some of which we can control, much of which we cannot. As I said several week ago in a sermon, we can't change our circumstances only how we respond to them.

Rob and Tiffany, as you surely already know, but about which you will undoubtedly and unfortunately further discover, the path ahead as parents will be the toughest thing you will ever love. As parents who just had their own three children back under the same roof, Linda and I can tell you, and I'm sure Sarah & Duncan would agree, the role may change (somewhat) but the challenge never really goes away, not really. Joy gets tempered with heart-ache, the future brings fears as well as fortune and worry too easily becomes a constant if uncomfortable companion.

IX.

And that's just the normal stuff, the stuff you can plan on. There is a whole lot more coming down the pike that cannot and, probably, should not be anticipated; it is just too hard. Cross those bridges when you come to them. However, when you do eventually find yourself on the far side of such a bridge, and such a tough span of time, you will have a choice to make. It is a choice reserved not just for parents for we all must make this choice, seemingly every day, especially the older we get.

Though we haven't necessarily spoken of it, my guess is that like me, Sarah, Duncan and Linda each had a moment this past weekend when we surveyed the friends and family gathered for this great wedding celebration and felt the warm embrace of love and support being offered. However, there was certainly a moment or two, I'm sure, when we felt a sting of sadness at those who could not attend, chose not to attend or have long since left us.

X.

In today's scripture reading from his letter to the church at Ephesus, the Apostle Paul rightly reminds us that time is short and the days are evil. While Paul may or may not have intended to emphasize an evil which is diabolical in nature, our own experience of the simple woes and inevitable misfortunes of life are more than enough to bear out the validity of such a claim and self-evident truth.

There will undoubtedly be actions, occasions and events in the finite number of our days which will scorch the earth of our lives. But, that doesn't mean we need to allow them to also salt the battlefield. It has been said that in ancient times the Roman army threw salt on the battlefield so that the crops of a conquered people would never again grow there. Even though the

earth of our lives may, at times, get scorched, things may yet still grow there if we will allow them to and if we so chose. The choice is ours to make, and ours alone.

XI.

Though inevitably and unavoidable misshapen, this life of ours is very much a beautiful, treasured and precious pearl. A pearl which is never perfect, but neither does it need to be. Let us make the choice to allow our lives together to be dense, complex, rich in a palate of tones which is mix of goodness and, yes, evil; with independent and interwoven melody lines all being played simultaneously toward the goal of expanding the breadth, range, and complexity of our faith. In short, a thundering orchestra of sound, sights, feelings and experiences, filling us with the Spirit, and causing us to rejoice as we sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to God in our hearts, and giving thanks at all times for the gift of this misshapen pearl. For, surely, this is both the will and the wisdom of the Lord. Amen.