

15B 2021

Paul encourages the Ephesians, “Be careful . . . 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.”

When we think of wisdom, we often have this image of a person climbing a mountain in search of a wise guru who will share with her the secret to inner peace, but in reality, there is no profound secret.

In fact, when an early sect known as the gnostics claimed to possess secret knowledge, the church declared them to be heretics.

Everything necessary for salvation can be known from the Bible and our own experiences.

In fact, one of the few things we swear in our ordination vows is that we believe that all things necessary for salvation are in the Bible.

We are all God’s children and God is available to all of us equally if we are willing to reach out.

God does not play hide and seek and has no favorites.

Inner peace does not come from some hidden truth, but from something available to all who pay attention, not from secret knowledge, but from moral clarity.

Moral clarity, in turn, is not something we memorize and apply, but is developed in each situation as we discern the most loving and just response possible, given current reality.

We have as our guide the dictum that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

Deep in our heart, we know how we would like others to treat us.

We carry that knowledge with us into every situation.

Moral clarity does not, in other words, come from a list of rules from the ancient past that we apply to contemporary life (though some rules from the past do have relevance today).

It requires instead discerning where God is leading us *now*.

We must ask ourselves, therefore, what is the loving thing to do in the *present* context.

Let me give you an example.

2000 years ago, in a world where a divorced woman had few options but to be an economic burden on her family, discouraging divorces was the loving thing to do.

One must base what is loving on the current conditions.

Of course, advocating to improve the world is a noble thing, but such change will not occur fast enough for the person standing in front of us.

We have to decide what is the loving thing to do *now*.

With respect to divorce, the context since has changed.

Women have more economic options.

I cannot see staying in a relationship that is abusive.

It is better for everyone involved—abuser, abused, and children—to get a divorce.

That is the most loving, life affirming thing one can do, given current reality.

Getting a divorce, on the other hand, because one does not find one's partner as entertaining as at the beginning of the relationship is not a loving thing.

It is not our job to keep others entertained all the time.

This leads to the question, how do we gain moral clarity?

We must look at a situation from various angles until we come to a place where we feel a lack of trying to make things be what they are not, a lack of the tension that this creates in ourselves.

As you know, I went to Charleston, SC on vacation and, while there, I toured McLeod Plantation.

Their mission is to educate visitors about history.

The tour guide was a matter-of-fact man who told us that it was *hard* history and, if we did not want to face it, if we had come for a different purpose, we were free to walk away from the tour at any point.

He then discussed the word “plantation.”

He said that it was a euphemism for privately owned forced labor camp.

It is difficult to argue with that description.

They were all privately owned, and they all involved forced labor.

Saying it that way sheds light on the ethics of the situation.

The word, “plantation,” on the other hand, has a certain charm that creates a tension between itself and reality, a tension that can be felt by those who are sensitive to such things.

Some are, of course, less sensitive, less aware of this tension.

For example, our guide at McLeod mentioned that people frequently ask (and by “people” he said he meant *white* people), “But weren’t there nice plantation owners?”

He would explain to them that, when we take someone who could become in life we know not what and force them instead to labor for us, there is nothing nice about it.

Again, it is difficult to dispute that perspective.

It has a kind of moral force because it strips away the romanticism, the excuses, the concealing narratives and leaves us with the essential ethical point—we would not consider nice someone who forced us to labor for them for free.

Of course, there are those who realize this sooner and those who get there later, but only those who get there will have inner peace about the topic.

As I traveled around Charleston, I saw many former Episcopal Churches who now call themselves Anglican.

This includes the two historic churches downtown, St. Phillip's and St. Michael's.

I was sad to see that they had broken away from the church, and over a single issue—human sexuality.

They refused to continue praying together with people who disagreed with them, yet we never find anyone who agrees with us on all issues.

We could not gather as the church if complete agreement were the prerequisite.

What is more, forming a church over a single issue turns the church into a political action committee, not the body of Christ.

Being aware that some of us reach that point of peace provided by moral clarity before others, we must be prepared to humble ourselves before God and not insist that everyone agree with us.

Many claim to have reached that point of inner peace, of course, but we have not achieved it until we have achieved it no matter what we might try to convince ourselves.

People involved in slavery sought to calm themselves with various stories.

They tried to believe that black people were unable to order themselves, for example, and white people therefore had to do it for them.

You can see that the assumption in the story is not that we are all God's children, but that blacks and whites are somehow fundamentally different.

Telling themselves this helped to force the issue from the forefront of their consciousness, but believing our own lies does not afford inner peace.

It grants only inner numbness.

In the case of people involved in the enslavement of others, this numbness permitted the amassing of remarkable wealth.

As I said, some are better at being aware of this tension than others and arrive at moral clarity sooner.

When we reach that point, when the tension between ideas and reality is minimal, we *know* that we know in a way that belies previous "knowing."

We all have gifts and deficits, so, in ethical matters, we may need to listen well to others who have reached that point of calmness before us.

If that is not available, then we must wait humbly and prayerfully for our answer.

In seeking peace in our hearts, we need no secret knowledge, but must cultivate the moral clarity that is afforded us by the dictum, do unto others.

God has so arranged the world that we all have access to this clarity, but we are all capable of avoiding it, of numbing ourselves.

“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.”