

On this Gospel Music Sunday, when our JOYFUL choir is singing, the words that leapt from the page for me in Paul's letter to the Ephesians were these: "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." This congregation has long been associated with quality expressions of musical praise, and no wonder, given the number of talented musicians we have amongst us. How many congregations 2 or 3 times our size would love to have a Sticks and Strings group, a Sweet Chaos dulcimer group, a Knife River Ringers bell choir, a JOYFUL mixed choir, a Seraphim women's choir, *and* the equivalent of Carol and Lawrence providing outstanding musical and worshipful leadership every week? We have been *so* blessed, and I know we're all so appreciative. Music occupies a unique place within us, within our souls and faith life, so that whether or not we are excellent musicians ourselves, hearing sacred music and singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, as Paul says, are often central to our experience of worshiping God. Paul understands this, as did the entire church! The early Christian church embraced music as a means of connecting with the Divine and spreading the Gospel.

Fast forward from the 1st C. and Paul to the 16th C. and the founder of our particular Christian denomination, Martin Luther. Luther loved music with a passion second only to his love for God and theology. I want to share some of Luther's thoughts because they're fun. Here's what Luther wrote: "I, Doctor Martin Luther, wish all lovers of the unshackled art of music grace and peace from God the Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ! I truly desire that all Christians would love and regard as worthy the lovely gift of music, which is a precious, worthy, and costly treasure given to mankind by God. The riches of music are so excellent and so precious that words fail me whenever I attempt to discuss and describe them.... In summation, next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts, and spirits... This precious gift has been given to man alone that he might thereby remind himself that God has created man for the express purpose of praising and extolling God." Clearly, Luther was a huge fan of music, and he composed numerous hymns and was himself a fine musician. It's as though he was writing about our JOYFUL choir when he continues, "We marvel when we hear music in which one voice sings a simple melody,

while three, four, or five other voices play and trip lustily around the voice that sings its simple melody and adorn this simple melody wonderfully with artistic musical effects, thus reminding us of a heavenly dance, where all meet in a spirit of friendliness, caress and embrace.” How awesome is that?

Of course, Luther was strongly opinionated where his passions were concerned, nor did he mince words, and here’s what he had to say about those who *disparage* music: “A person who does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs.” I’m sure that none of us would be so foolish as to fall into this clodhopper category, which would put us on the outs not only with Martin Luther, but with both the Old and New Testament, with the rich history of sacred music within the church, and with Christ, Himself, who we are told sang a hymn with His disciples at the conclusion of the Last Supper. Musical participation not only inspires us, but according to Paul in our lesson, it is one of the ways we live wisely. All of which suggests that to embrace sacred music is to be both faithful and wise.

Wisdom is actually the primary concern of both of our lessons this morning, from Proverbs 9 and Ephesians 5. And wisdom is highly praised and sought after throughout Scripture. As we reflect on wisdom this morning, let’s think about what wisdom actually isn’t and is, from a Scriptural perspective.

Wisdom, within the Bible, is *not* identical with knowledge. Knowledge is important; learning about things is essential, yes. But we all know knowledgeable people who are far from wise, as well as wise people who never had much time for gaining knowledge. Wisdom, therefore, is not the same as having a great store of knowledge. *Nor* is wisdom, Scripturally speaking, the capacity of being capable of tremendous abstraction and complexity in reasoning. We *can’t* all be Einstein’s or Stephen Hawking’s, but we *can* all grow in wisdom. Because Wisdom, especially in the book of Proverbs, the source of our first lesson, is quite simply: skill in living. Which brings intellectual learning, emotional intelligence, *and* basic common sense all into the realm of wisdom. All of these contribute greatly to living skillfully and wisely. To help us attain this goal, the book of Proverbs is filled with wise sayings, homespun gems of wisdom with practical application, that the ancient Israelites wished to pass on. And keeping that tradition going centuries later, St. Paul, writes in our 2nd lesson:

“Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as *wise*, making the most of the time... So, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” Wisdom, then, involves skill in living, making the most of the time, understanding God’s will. St. Paul and the Proverb’s writers urge us to be wise. The last thing they want us to be is a fool! So, how do we here this *morning* stack up? Are we wise? Or are we fools, the last thing we should want to be?

In both our lessons, we see that wisdom is a *choice*; it involves intentionality. In fact, the lesson from Proverb 9 is set up as a little vignette in which two women are vying for the attention of a young man, which we would see if we had read the entire chapter. But one of the women represents wisdom—the part that’s in our reading-- and one represents folly—she shows up in the verses following our reading--and both are encouraging this young man to come in and feast with *them*. The point of the chapter is that the young man must *choose* between wisdom and folly, as must we all. Living wisely involves *making good decisions*.

In Ephesians, Paul *also* encourages us to *make good decisions* in order to be wise. Paul immediately emphasizes the *intentionality* of being wise, by beginning, “be careful then how you live”. The wise take care in how they approach life, not willy nilly, but thoughtfully. As if how we live *matters*, which it does. Wise people, Paul tells us, “make the most of the time.” I think that’s a really intriguing phrase. I think about time a lot, do you? Both in the short term, and also in the long term. Time is a strange entity in many ways that each of us experiences quite individually and maybe quirkily. For example, in some ways I can’t wait for mid-November to be here, so that all of the chaos and polarization of the elections are done and behind us. We hope! But, on the other hand, I don’t want to hurry time along, because there’s a lot of wonderful seasonal stuff that happens between now and mid-November: the state fair, autumnal beauty, harvesting gardens, football, and so on. So, if riding horses could be representative of the passing of time, I’m both trying to spur my horse on to a gallop at the same time I’m pulling back on the reins saying “Whoa, slow down.” I have mixed feelings about time’s passing. The irony is that either way, the pace of the horse is unaffected. It’s all just in my mind. Objectively, time moves along at a steady and relentless pace, we all have the same number of hours in the day, and maybe Paul is urging us to make time our *friend* by using it wisely, rather than turning into an enemy by

squandering it, trying to speed it up or slow it down, sleeping through it, or treating it as if it had no value. Psalm 90 reminds us that our days on this earth are numbered. Time is not an inexhaustible resource within our human lives on this planet. “Make the most of your time”, this Scripture urges us, in order to be wise. But a caveat there--- we want to consider what it actually means to make the most of our time in a wise manner. It doesn’t necessarily mean filling our time up just to seem busy and important. Whenever I preach on the importance of Sabbath time and rest and balance, I get a lot of feedback. So, I know we are apparently a group of overachievers who tend to over function in the time we are given. Making the most of our time doesn’t mean working ourselves into an early grave or being busy just for the sake of being busy. Another translation of this verse read, “Make the most of your *opportunities*”. I think that’s a wise translation. One of the gifts that time, as our friend, offers us is: opportunities. Opportunities for work, yes. But also opportunities for rest. For pleasure. For appreciation. For reflection and prayer. For relationships, and travel, and good food, and exploring new experiences. For praising and making music. Making the most of our time, making the most of our opportunities won’t happen by accident; it involves choice and intentionality and effort—in fact, it involves wisdom.

Paul continues in the same theme as he encourages us not to live foolishly or carelessly, but rather to consider what *God’s will* is for us and for the world, and for the part we have to play in the world. He suggests we cultivate an awareness of God’s presence within us and among us; that we recognize that it is God’s Spirit that fills us with life. So much so that we may be inspired to musical praise and to giving thanks, bringing us back to our musical theme---it is *wise* to praise God with music and to live thankfully. From which we can infer that to live a life that doesn’t acknowledge and praise God, to refuse to make a joyful musical noise of some kind to the Lord, is to be not only a clodhopper, but a fool. And to live a life without gratitude in which we instead focus on what we don’t have, *is also* to be a fool. The wise *intentionally* live with gratitude and thanks. I think we understand this to be true, just based on observation of ourselves and those around us. People who do not make a regular practice of gratitude can easily become resentful, bitter, or take on an attitude of entitlement. That is the way of *folly*. In contrast, people who *choose* to live thankfully are doubly blest; not

only did they receive the initial blessing, but they are shaped by their grateful recognition of that blessing into wiser, more faithful, more loving people. Wisdom or folly? How will we live?

It might seem that this choice would be a no-brainer, but it's not; simply because folly often looks pretty attractive in the short-term—it can look easier or more lucrative. Taking into account longer-term consequences in order to choose wisely sometimes involves sacrifice, or patience, or a high level of maturity---all of which is raising the bar for us. We, as humans, need constant encouragement to live wisely and well, rather than foolishly and carelessly. We need the inspiration and support of gathering as a worshiping community to seek wisdom rather than settle for folly.

But, perhaps, in the final analysis, it's not just a matter of *us* seeking *wisdom*. Maybe *Wisdom* seeks *us*. We clearly have a part to play in all of this, but it may well be that wisdom is, finally, not so much a human achievement, as a gift from God. Acknowledging human limitations to our wisdom may be the most important step in actually *finding* wisdom. God gives wisdom to those who seek it, to those who are open to receive it and those who recognize that God, alone, is the ultimate source of wisdom. Humility before God is necessary if we are to become truly wise. In the New Testament, Christ is presented not only as a teacher of wisdom, but sometimes as Wisdom itself, the wisdom of God incarnate. To receive Christ is to receive wisdom.

The Gospel song we're about to sing is a prayer for a close daily walk with Jesus, the kind of walk that becomes a journey towards wisdom, towards making the most of our time, towards seeking God's will, and towards making grateful music to God. Looking to avoid being clod-hoppers or fools, we wisely embrace the gifts of Christ and salvation that inspire us to gratitude and song. Amen.