

SEVEN PILLARS OF WISDOM
PROVERBS 9: 1-6; EPHESIANS 5: 15-20

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University Church of Chicago
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Dr. Karl Menninger told about watching his granddaughter playing beside the creek at their family's summer cabin. He watched the four-year-old sorting the rocks from the bed of the stream. She first began sorting the large rocks from the smaller ones, then the colored rocks from the white ones, then the rocks that had red veins running through them from the stones with blue coloring. She had neat little piles of rocks all along the creek bank--until she reached the point of exasperation. How many ways were there to classify rocks? So, being a four-year-old, she presently threw up her hands and walked away from the whole project.

How many times have you heard someone say--or have said yourself: "Well, you know, there are only two kinds of people in the world..."? And then the exceptionally wise person went on to describe how the whole world can be divided into halves: say, those who like Brad Pitt and those who do not, or those who know how to make money and those who do not, or those who are generous and those who are stingy. Whatever. Perhaps it's more accurate to say that there are, indeed, two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who do not.

Soon, however, one's categories develop all kinds of sub-categories, shadings, subtle differences. As Walter Brueggemann has declared, "The [Biblical] narrative sets itself against every world-view and ideology which regards the world as settled and fixed. It is ironic and troubling that the modern world which so celebrates freedom also tends to believe that present life is closed and contained. It is an assumption of the modern world...that there will be no genuine newness, no really independent gift yet to be given."

Such a world-view leads us to divide ourselves into two camps. We become people who either have an **inordinate pride** which imagines the world has been completely entrusted to us so that we may construct our own future out of the present, or we become people of **deep despair** who believe the present world of inequity and oppression is forever and that there is no power in heaven or on earth that can make real change.

That is our world-view if we live without faith, a view that divides us into opposing categories of living. The world has not been entrusted to us alone. In inscrutable graciousness, God has retained the amazing gift of life. The world we thought impossible has been made possible by the power of God.

The writer of Ephesians struggles with this kind of dualism in today's second lesson, as does the writer of the Book of Proverbs. The mark of the wise person is to use the time that God has given, and use it to change the world. "Making the most" of the time, or, as it is usually rendered, "redeeming the time," is our task as followers of Jesus Christ.

Listen, friends, our planet is in danger; health care reform is about to be torpedoed by the right wing crazies; the war in Afghanistan will ultimately prove, I believe, to be worse than Vietnam; the war in Iraq is the longest we have ever fought; poverty is endemic in our country; 48 of the fifty states are facing huge budget deficits; and nobody wants to use the word "depression" to describe our present economic condition.

The writer of Ephesians is telling us what time it is. "The days are evil," (v. 16) so we must "make every moment count." The urgency is in the way we live right now. To be "spiritually formed" as a Christian believer, one is to be mature in one's faith and to be concerned about developing character as a human being. Claiming oneself to be "formed" or "mature" is the height of hubris. We are in a process, on a journey toward maturity.

Ward Just's latest novel, *In The Garden of Exiles*, explores the wages of power in Washington, D.C., the exactions of secrecy and the torque of conscience in people who seek to make their mark on history. Alec Malone, the novel's protagonist, is a photographer who has worked for a major newspaper in the nation's capital, but after he refused to go to Vietnam, he made his living photographing movie stars on location. Alec, like Ward Just, grew up in the midst of North Shore power; his father was a United States senator.

Alec is one of those people who drifts along in life, makes a good living, has a decent marriage, lives in a nice home—but never faces who he is or where his life is leading. Until one day he meets his ex-wife's father, Andre Duran, a mysterious warrior who disappeared from his daughter's life when she was three years old and who is now living in D.C. with a group of political refugees.

The stories Duran tells compel Alec to visit him again. He confronts the old man: why did he throw himself into the struggles of middle Europe—Poland, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria—the way he did? Why did he suffer in a Soviet prison gulag all those years?

"You refuse to listen," Duran replies. "I have been trying to say to you that we had no choice. I could not stand aside."

Alex goes home and looks at the wall of the best photographs he has taken in his job. He examines each one and all of them together, looking for a common theme. When he discovers it, he is devastated. The theme is a lack of conflict. He is forced to make a full self-accounting. The unexamined life may not be worth living, but the unlived life, examined may yield a cautionary wisdom.

When I was pastor of a Methodist Church many years ago in a small town in Oklahoma, our little congregation had a supply of dishes, cups and saucers for our monthly fellowship suppers. The Baptists, the only other church in town, had enough spoons, knives and forks for a good supper. So, we scheduled our suppers on the first Wednesday of the month and borrowed silverware from the Baptists; they scheduled their suppers on the second Thursday of the month and borrowed our plates.

Then, a rich Baptist woman died and left her church enough money to buy a supply of china. Which led the Board of Deacons of the Baptist Church to pass a resolution which stated, "From now on, we will neither lend nor borrow."

It is that kind of isolation, particularity, denial of our common life together that always plagues the church. However, the call is always to a universal faith, that the church will truly be "a house of prayer for all people."

A friend with whom I was talking last week brought me to a new realization of this truth. She was telling me about attending a national meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous several years ago at which she heard a speech by the physician who wrote one of the key chapters in the AA Big Blue Book. He was dying of cancer at the time, but he was able to live a life of faith because his whole existence, thanks to AA, was based on the idea of acceptance.

He wrote: "And acceptance is the answer to **all** my problems today. When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place, thing or situation--some fact of my life--unacceptable to me, and

I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. Nothing, **absolutely nothing**, happens in God's world by mistake...Unless I accept life completely on life's [God's] terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes."

Faith in God's promise is a possibility which the world sees as scandalous. "Do you mean that you believe that God can tell a person to pick up and go and that person will follow God? That's not reasonable, logical." That's the way the world views somebody who answers God's call to ministry, who goes to the mission field, who takes a job with less pay in order to be true to her or his convictions about morality, or who blows the whistle about corruption and malfeasance.

The world says it's about "self-realization," about conformity, keeping certain people in line--oppressing them if necessary, for they really don't understand reality anyway. The church says that it's about promise, about living against the grain of the world.

Jane Kenyon died in April, 1995, after a fifteen-month bout with leukemia. She lived the last twenty years of her life with her husband Donald Hall on a farm in New Hampshire, where they both practiced the craft of poetry. Ms. Kenyon's poetry dealt with life's most basic issues--death, anger, depression, fear, hope--in some of the most insightful verse of our time. Donald Hall has collected some of her best as well as her most recent poetry in a new book, the title of which is taken from this poem, "Otherwise":

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
Otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down

with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.