

DATE: August 17, 2003

SUNDAY: Ordinary 20

SERMON: Living Carefully

TEXTS: Ephesians 5: 8-9, 15-20

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In Garrison Keillor's sketches of life in his mythical hometown Lake Wobegon, the Lutheran minister, Pastor Ingqvist is a daily reader of the Dear Abby advice column. He becomes alarmed when he notices how frequently she counsels people to talk to their ministers. Pastor Ingqvist, you may remember, is not one of the most outgoing or assertive personalities in the world, (he's a Lutheran in Minnesota, after all) so he's letting his imagination run a little wild as he envisions hordes of people following Dear Abby's advice and turning up on his doorstep seeking guidance. Especially, since most of the time, he observes, the things they write to Dear Abby about are so ridiculous. In one column, for example, a 14 year-old girl writes to Dear Abby and unfolds her tale of hopeless, unrequited love for a 50 year-old married man who is serving a long sentence in a federal penitentiary for a serious crime. She has been his pen-pal on the outside, and now has fallen hopelessly in love with him.

"Talk to your minister," Abby advises, and the thought sends a shiver down Pastor Ingqvist's spine. Keillor narrates the good pastor's imagined scene.

. . . as she pours out her love for Vince, her belief in his innocence, the fact that his wife never loved him. . . not like she, Trish, can love him, and the fact that despite his age and their never having met except in letters, there is something indescribably sacred and precious between them, all the pastor can think is "You're crazy. Don't be ridiculous."

Don't be ridiculous. It probably should be the Eleventh Commandment, but since we don't always pay much attention to the first Ten, it probably doesn't matter. But

it's what the author of Ephesians exhorts as he attempts to help communities of new Christian believers struggle with what it means to live as Christians. "*Be careful how you live,*" he tells them (and us for whom his words still have some authority and power,) *not as unwise people, but as wise, making the most of the time, for the days are evil. So do not be foolish— don't be ridiculous—but be wise, understanding what the will of the Lord is.*"

John Ortberg, pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California, and author of the book *Everyone is Normal Until You Get to Know Them,* says that one of the marks of the human condition is that we are not only depraved or lost; we are frequently ridiculous.

A friend of mine introduced me to a web site called darwinawards.com, in which certain people are given the Darwin Award, almost always posthumously, for doing something so stupid or reckless that they end up removing themselves from the gene pool, thereby giving an unintended assist to the progress of human evolution.

One recent story that caught my eye happened in Amarillo, Texas, where some local painters were hired to paint the buildings on the Amarillo fairgrounds. In the course of repositioning the scaffolding, they accidentally touched the metal framework against a high-tension transformer and were electrocuted. A tragic accident, to be sure, but a real accident of the sort that regularly makes the news. The accident was naturally the buzz of the town, and of course, local government officials had to launch an investigation of how this terrible thing could have happened. They decided to recreate the conditions of the accident by re-enacting the movements of the two painters who had been repositioning the scaffold. (You can see this one coming, can't you?) Before live TV cameras from the local news station, which of course, had

been called in to give appropriate political exposure, these two “geniuses” took hold of the scaffolding and moved it precisely as the two painters had done. . . promptly electrocuting themselves in the process, thus proving themselves worthy of the Darwin Award.

Thankfully, most of us are not ridiculous in so lethal a fashion. And lest we think that all the ridiculous people are out there somewhere, attempting to get their names in the Guinness Book of World Records for being able to eat the most hot dogs in a given span of time, think of how often people in churches fight, or even split the church over which hymnal to use, or whether guitars or organs are the instruments God prefers to hear when we sing or which method of distributing the communion elements is the right one. I’m told that there was a considerable flap, both within this congregation and among the townspeople when this church was first built in an architectural style that was a departure from that favored by traditional New England Congregationalists. Particularly controversial were the stained glass windows. Apparently there was a considerable line of thought that held that God preferred clear, or at most translucent glass, unadorned by color or decoration. Why this should have been so, when we live in a world where nature itself is a riot of color and decoration – a world created by a Creator– who, as Annie Dillard has observed, loves pizzazz– is somewhat of a mystery, until we remember the human penchant for frequently being ridiculous. Probably a lot of arguments that occur in churches, as well as in our homes, could be brought to a screeching halt if we just had Pastor Ingqvist around to say to us, “That’s crazy; don’t be ridiculous.”

Well, we may not have Pastor Ingqvist, but we do have the early Christian pastor who wrote Ephesians. “*Live as*

children of the light,” he says, “*for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. . . So be careful how you live; do not be foolish, but understand what the will of God is. Do not be filled up with an excess of wine; but be filled up with the Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody in your hearts, giving thanks to God at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

What does it mean to “live carefully” as our author puts it, or to more accurately give it the same level of urgency he does, we might translate it, “Look out; watch where you’re walking!” Anyone who’s spent much time in Paris would know exactly how to interpret that warning; you learn very quickly that it’s never safe to forget to watch where you’re walking, given the fact that Parisians stubbornly refuse to curb their dogs or clean up after them.

But I think that the writer of Ephesians has something a little more serious in mind than avoiding doggy-doo on the sidewalks. He’s urging the use of good judgment and prudence as a way of life.

Now it’s important, I think to distinguish between prudence, on the one hand, and the two opposite extremes of recklessness or fearful caution, on the other. Recklessness doesn’t see the dangers or ignores them if it does. It’s the “damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead” approach to life. In fact, we have a saying to describe people who live recklessly, don’t we–“Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” Fearful caution, on the other hand, is the product of a runaway imagination. It imagines the very worst-case scenario as always being the likely one. The glass is always half-empty and getting emptier by the second, and every day is likely to be a rainy day. (Last week’s weather was almost enough to make rainy-day-ers out of all of us.) To the fearfully over-cautious, no risk is worth taking, and

no goal worth the risk. Prudence recognizes that there are real dangers and pitfalls to be avoided, but it realizes that life is never risk-free, and so it makes a sensible appraisal of the risks, takes whatever steps are necessary to avoid the pitfalls and minimize the risks, but then moves ahead toward the goal. I suspect that more of us are prone to fall into the foolishness of fearful caution than we are to the folly of recklessness.

I'm more convinced of this than ever before observing our reaction as a people in the months following September 11. Watching the American public's reaction, especially from our vantage point in Europe, was a fascinating, if not particularly edifying exercise. From our perspective, what we saw was a nation gripped in a paralyzing caution rather than a nation prudently preparing to cope with the real risks from terrorism. For months after September 11, I had panic-stricken American parents demanding that we increase the security of our buildings to protect their children in the nursery schools which we housed. Our church council acted with admirable prudence, I thought. They sought expert advice from professional security services, from the regional security office at the U. S. Embassy, and from the French security apparatus. They then followed that advice, some of which was costly enough to put us in a budget deficit, and adopted procedures that were both sensible and realistic, realizing that there is no such thing as a one hundred percent guarantee of safety. The Americans who had been in France for quite some time prior to September 11, as well as the French, African, and Asian, members of our congregation were all in accord and applauded the Council for its good judgment. The shorter-term Americans—those who had only come to France after the September 11 attacks—were not satisfied. Short of wrapping our entire building in razor wire and surrounding it with a 20 ft

high, reinforced concrete wall, I'm not sure anything would have satisfied them. Many took their children out of the schools and some stopped attending church for several months because they were convinced Osama bin Laden had our church high on his target list. Coming in and out of American airports in the past two years and experiencing the sheer irrationality of some of the so-called security measures, like pulling 85 year-old grandmothers in wheelchairs out of line for special searches, has simply confirmed that we are a nation still in the grip of a paralyzing caution based on fear rather than a nation dealing prudently with accurately appraised risks and devising sensible procedures for dealing with them. Prudence, it seems, is not a particularly strong concept in our cultural lexicon.

Christians are not to allow themselves to be paralyzed by such fears. Why? Because we are part of a community that lives by a different story of the meaning of life and death, a different story of the meaning of our existence. We are part the new humanity brought into being by the resurrection of Christ, and as such, we now are called to live the life of the new age. We are to be the model of how God intends human beings to live together and relate to one another. We are not to live in mortal fear of death and disaster; because we believe that neither death nor disaster will have the final word. Death is a penultimate, not the ultimate reality of our lives. In our life together, we are to make visible the advent of God's just rule. Or as Tom Skinner once put it memorably, "The church is to be the visible model on earth of what's happening in heaven."

So then, how do we develop the ability to "live carefully?" Our author suggests, in the first place, that it has something to do with what we fill ourselves up with. "Don't fill yourselves up with wine

to excess,” he says. In other words, don’t deal with the risks by getting loaded so that your judgment no longer functions. Anybody, and especially anybody living in a college town, knows how much prudent judgment is exercised by twenty year-olds with a skinful of beer. Rather, he says, get “loaded up” on the Spirit through corporate worship, through singing the praises of God, absorbing the realities of God’s presence and guidance as you make melody in your hearts to God, and then you will have the right fuel inside you to enable you to walk through the minefields of this life with clear heads, clear eyes, and enough courage and love to see you through to the goal.

That’s why we come to worship, why we gather each week in one another’s company to praise God—why we sing hymns and songs and make melody in our hearts. We’re here to get “filled up” with the Spirit, so that we can free ourselves, both from reckless risk-taking and from paralyzing caution, and walk through this world, in love, in hope, and in joy. For that’s the kind of life our author is describing, isn’t he? A Spirit-filled life is a life of joy. And joy, as Teilhard de Chardin reminded us, “is the infallible sign of the presence of God.” In a world where true joy, as opposed to a shallow and fleeting happiness which is the goal for so many, in a world that is often dangerous and tangled and dark, in a world where the only songs people know how to sing are laments, we are called to sing the Lord’s song,— the song of resurrection joy. It may be, in fact, that the only way the world will find it’s way out of the minefield of joyless despair is if it can hear the Christians singing.