

# Wisdom in the Wilderness

Proverbs 9:1-6

Ephesians 5:15-20

Our daughter Erica returned to the camp site with her hand down the back of her pants, scratching her back side. Mosquito bites. The camping sites on the Boundary Water Canoe Area do have certain amenities, which include a place or two cleared for you to put your tent, a cast iron grill for cooking on an open fire and a toilet, which people generally refer to as the throne. The throne is always down a long path, a minimum of 150 feet from the shore. It is generally located on a raised area and consists of a two ½ foot wooden seat with an appropriate sized hole. It is you and nature. One of the challenges, of course, in using the throne is it is often a place where mosquitoes congregate. Dropping your pants is like ringing the dinner bell for mosquitoes.

When our daughter Erica told some of her friends that she was going camping with her family in the Boundary Water Canoe Area, several of them said to her, “I would like to do that”. Erica said, “how do you feel about carrying a canoe on your back and all your camping gear in order to portage from one lake to another? Cans and bottles are not allowed so you will have to do without a nice cold beer. You will, of course, be sleeping on the ground and oh yeah, did I mention the throne?” Several of those friends were suddenly less enthusiastic.

Erica was reminding her friends that the Boundary Water Canoe Area is a wilderness. It is an important reminder to give anyone who is interested in going into the BWCA. This is a wilderness. When my son first started going up to the BWCA with some buddies on their own, without any other adults, the one thing that I emphasized again and again is that this is a wilderness. There are no stores to get those extra supplies you forgot, like mosquito lotion, toilet paper, rope for hanging your food away from bears, a tent or any of the many necessities. If you should get hurt, you could easily be a day or two paddle from help. It is a wilderness.

Surprisingly, once you are out in the BWCA, all set up on a nice camp site overlooking a pristine lake, you can begin to forget that you are in a wilderness area. The lakes often grow calm and very inviting for a refreshing swim. It can be serene and peaceful, which is one of the major draws of going into the BWCA. With a nice meal, a warming fire at night, stars out over head, you can feel the relaxation seeping into your body. At your peril, it is tempting to forget you are in a wilderness area.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and to Christians who ever since have found guidance from the correspondence of Paul, he seeks to remind those who follow Christ that we are in a wilderness area. This is what it means to be a Christian. "Be careful then how you live.... because the days are evil". It would be a huge mistake to take these

words of Paul as an admonition to minimize our engagement with the world or even to see the world in essentially negative terms. When Paul says “be careful... the days are evil” he is giving the same type of warning my daughter gave to her friends and I gave to my son. The wilderness is a beautiful place, but it is a wilderness. To be a Christian is to recognize that the spirit and values of God’s love, justice, forgiveness and compassion are often at odds with the way the world functions. As one scholar put it, Christian language speaks of evil days in terms of systems of oppression that require resistance. We live in this wilderness.

The days are evil and therefore Black Lives Matter has come into existence fighting the continuing scourge of racism. The days are evil and therefore the Athletic Director for the University of Minnesota resigns in disgrace as one more male is accused of assaulting women. The days are evil and so Colorado deals with polluted water and the legacy of mining, while Minnesota deliberates on whether to let Poly Met mine near the BWCA. The days are evil and so County Clerks defy the Supreme Court denying marriage rights to LGBT citizens and store owners refuse to offer their services. The days are evil and so we pay football coaches huge sums of money as we fall victim to the notion that human value and worth is linked directly to our net worth.

Paul never says stay out of this beautiful wilderness, which is our world, he does strongly remind us that we live in a wilderness and if we

wish to be faithful to the way of Christ we must be prepared and remember where we are.

Sometimes in the BWCA you are keenly aware that you are in a wilderness. That was the case for us last Saturday, when the skies darkened, the winds began and a thunderstorm rolled in with loud cracks of lighting and no shelter other than the rain tarp over our heads. You know you are in a wilderness. But, there are many other times when the sun is out, the days are calm, when it can become easy to forget, even to become careless about your wilderness existence.

As we paddled out on our last day on the Boundary Waters, my son suddenly felt a need to find a throne. We pulled up at the nearest open camp site. On his way back to the canoe, Aaron discovered a fire still smoldering below the cast iron grill. He, of course, put it out. But, whoever was there last had clearly become careless about their wilderness existence, putting at risk animals, fellow campers and all those whose lives depend on the health of the wilderness. Similarly, sexism, racism, the denigration of our earth, human devaluation because of net worth or social standing, can flare up at anytime because of the carelessness that anyone of us might exercise. Paul is advocating for a healthy wilderness. "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil."

For most people a trip into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area is a communal experience. In order to minimize human impact on this

pristine area, groups are limited to a maximum of 9 people. Generally folks travel in a group of some sort. Even the occasional solo canoeist is strongly encouraged to let others know the day of entry, the route he or she expects to take and the day he or she expects to leave. Like monastic monks, solitude and solo existence, is never disconnected from community. On the contrary solitude is intended to deepen the experience of community, that there are people who care deeply about you. For Paul a communal approach to wilderness living is in part what he means by living not as unwise people, but as wise. Wisdom is never a solo enterprise. If we are to tap into the deep values of God's love, God's justice, God's forgiveness, God's healing, God's Compassion, God's care for all creation, we need the wisdom that comes through our common life.

In her book Learning to Walk in the Darkness, Barbara Brown Taylor says, "people of faith have deep pockets of wisdom about how to live through long nights in the wilderness." We share a common wisdom found in faith, but like any group preparing for wilderness living we need each other to check and double check, making sure we have the provisions we need. Check and double check, making sure we have put out the fire that might cause harm to others. This is why Paul encourages us to sing Psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs among ourselves, singing and making melody to Christ in our hearts. It is in and through community that we nurture wisdom in this wilderness life to

which we are called. The ancient word from Proverbs tells us Wisdom sends out her servant-girls, she calls from the highest places in the town, “You that are simple, turn in here!” Wisdom is shared.

Wisdom in the wilderness also alerts us to that which we should avoid. In the BWCA, portages are created to get you from one lake to another if there are no water passages available. Portages are also created around rapids and areas of running water that might be dangerous. Last week as we were completing a portage, I could hear people yelling to each other who for whatever reason had decided to ignore the wisdom of the portage and instead forge ahead through the rapids. They did not seem to be in any life threatening situation, but they did seem to have created a problem for themselves that at the very least could seriously impact their trip and their wilderness experience.

Paul offers these words of wisdom, “do not get drunk with wine...that only leads to trouble...take the portage and be filled with the Spirit.” Again, we would be short changing Paul if we thought the portage he encourages has only to do with alcohol consumption. As one scholar put it, “drunkenness is the condition of being unfocused, off balanced, and out of kilter with ‘what God wants for you.’” There is no shortage of temptations in our wilderness world putting us at odds with healthy wilderness life. Recognizing those temptations, avoiding those temptations, taking the portage is what enables us to live in faithfulness to who we are called to be.

According to Paul our communal wisdom for wilderness living is strengthened and nurtured through a spirit of Thanksgiving. “Giving thanks to God at all times,” says Paul, “and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Again, this is wisdom that runs counter to the wisdom of our world. Who gives thanks for everything? Do the people in Charleston give thanks for the killing of their brothers and sisters at prayer on a Wednesday night? Do we give thanks for a health diagnosis that can threaten our lives? Do we give thanks for any of the many heartaches and challenges that come our way? The answer of the world is clearly no. But, Paul knows that our thanksgiving has nothing to do with the problems and difficulties of the moment and everything to do with the assurance that God’s spirit, God’s wisdom dwells among us. In coming together as a community we give thanks for her guiding presence through good times and bad.

You may never find yourself dropping your pants as you prepare to sit on the throne deep out in the woods of the BWCA. You may never find yourself scratching your backside after mosquitoes have had their evening feast on your behind. But, all of us committed to Christ and the way of God’s love and justice live in the wilderness and all of us are offered the wisdom needed for wilderness life.

**Proverbs 9:1-6**

*In our first lesson the book of Proverbs follows the Jewish tradition in speaking of God's wisdom in feminine terms. Wisdom offers us a banquet by which our lives might be guided, nurtured and strengthened. "Come" says wisdom. The invitation is open to all.*

Wisdom has built her house,  
 she has hewn her seven pillars.  
 She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,  
 she has also set her table.  
 She has sent out her servant-girls,  
 she calls from the highest places in the town,  
 "You that are simple, turn in here!"  
 To those without sense she says,  
 "Come, eat of my bread  
 and drink of the wine I have mixed.  
 Lay aside immaturity, and live,  
 and walk in the way of insight."

**Ephesians 5:15-20**

*The Apostle Paul lives with a keen awareness that following the way of Christ often puts us at odds with the dominant ways and norms of the world and the world's powers. Those norms and those powers are often very tempting and so Paul includes in this portion of his letter a warning "to be careful...because the days are evil." Paul, however, does not leave us with just a warning, but rather encourages us to receive and embrace the wisdom of God's spirit found in our life together.*

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.