

Season After Pentecost
Haven Lutheran Church
Hagerstown Maryland
Three-Week Series in Ephesians, Week 2
August 15, 2021
Readings: Proverbs 9: 1-6 Ephesians 5: 15-20

Grace and peace to you from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

*“Pay attention to 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.”* Eph. 5: 15-16

A retelling of Leo Tolstoy’s story, “The Three Questions,” by John Muth.

There once was a [young] boy named Nikolai who sometimes felt uncertain about the right way to act. “I want to be a good person,” he told his friends. “But I don’t always know the best way to do that.” Nikolai’s friends understood and they wanted to help him.

“If only I could find the answers to my three questions,” Nikolai continued, “then I would always know what to do: When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?”

Nikolai’s friends considered his first question. Sonya, the heron, spoke, “To know the best time to do things, one must plan in advance,” she said. Gogol, the monkey, who had been rooting through some leaves to find something good to eat, said, “You will know when to do things if you watch and pay close attention.” Then Pushkin, the dog, who was just dosing off, rolled over and said, “You can’t pay attention to everything yourself. You need a pack to keep watch and help you decide when to do things. For example, Gogol, a coconut is about to fall on your head!”

Nikolai thought for a moment. Then he asked his second question. “Who is the most important one?” “Those who are closest to heaven,” said Sonya, circling up into the sky. “Those who know how to heal the sick,” said Gogol, stoking his noggin bruised from the coconut. “Those who make the rules,” growled Pushkin.

Nikolai thought some more. Then he asked the third question. “What is the right thing to do?” “Flying,” said the heron. “Having fun all the time,” laughed the monkey. “Fighting,” barked Pushkin right away.

Then the boy thought for a long while. He loved his friends. He knew they were all trying their best to help him answer his questions. But their answers didn't seem quite right.

Then, an idea came to him. *I know!* He thought. *I will ask Leo, the turtle. He has lived a very long time Surely he will know the answers I am looking for.*

Nikolai hiked high up into the mountains where the old turtle lived all alone. When Nikolai arrived, he found Leo digging a garden. The turtle was old, and digging was hard for him. "I have three questions and I came to ask your help," Nikolai said. "When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?"

Leo listened carefully, but he only smiled. Then he went on with his digging. "You must be tired," Nikolai said at last. "Let me help you," The turtle gave him his shovel and thanked him. And because it was easier for a young boy to dig than it was for an old turtle, Nikolai kept on digging until the rows were finished.

But as he finished, the wind blew wildly and rain burst from darkened clouds. As they moved toward the cottage for shelter, Nikolai suddenly heard a cry for help.

Running down the path, he found a panda whose leg had been injured by a fallen tree. Carefully, Nikolai carried her into Leo's house and made a splint for her leg with a stick of bamboo. The storm raged on, banging at the doors and windows. The panda woke up. "Where am I?" she said, "And where is my child?"

The boy ran out of the cottage and down the path. The roar of the storm was deafening. Pushing against the howling wind and drenching rain, he ran farther into the forest. There he found the panda's child, cold and shivering on the ground.

The little panda was wet and scared, but alive. Nikolai carried her inside and made her warm and dry. Then he laid her in her mother's arms. Leo smiled when he saw what the boy had done.

The next morning the sun was warm, birds sang, and all was well with the world. The panda's leg was healing nicely, and she thanked Nikolai for saving her and her baby

from the storm. At that moment, Sonya, Gogol, and Pushkin, [Nikolai's friends],” arrived to make sure everyone was all right.

Nikolai felt great peace within himself. He had wonderful friends. And he had saved the panda and her child. But he also felt disappointed. He still had not found the answers to his three questions. So he asked Leo one more time.

The old turtle looked at the boy. “But your questions have been answered!” he said. “They have?” said the boy.

“Yesterday, if you had not stayed to help me dig my garden, you wouldn't have heard the panda's cries for help in the storm. Therefore, the most important time was the time you spend digging in the garden. The important one at the moment was me, and the most important thing to do was to help me with my garden.”

“Later, when you found the injured panda, the important time was the time you spent mending her leg and saving her child. The important ones were the panda and her baby. And the most important thing to do was to take care of them and make them safe.”

The wise turtle said, “Remember then that there is only one important time, and that time is now. The important one is always the one you are with. And the important thing is to do good for the one who is standing at your side. For these, my dear boy, are the answers to what is most important in this world. This is why we are here.”¹

“Pay attention to 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.” Eph. 5: 15-16

When is the best time to do things and what is the right thing to do? Webster's definition of “wisdom” “is the ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting. [Which is why we read in Ephesians] ... do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Wisdom discerns between what is right and what is wrong according to God's ways and will. Wisdom [from God] insists there is good and there is evil. The wise [pay attention and] are careful. They make the most of every opportunity. They understand there is evil in the world. And they seek the will of God² in God's Word and in God's Word made flesh, Jesus,

and amid a community of believers. That is wisdom among followers of Jesus as we pay attention to how we live.

And that other question, "Who is the most important one?" Leo the turtle must have consulted with Jesus: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind' and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Luke 10:27) The most important one? The Lord our God, whom we love and serve by loving those that God loves and doing good for them. This is the holy wisdom of God's love. This is why we are here. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 8/14/21

ENDNOTE

1. The Three Questions: Based on a story by Leo Tolstoy. Written and illustrated by Jon J. Muth New York" Scholastic Press, 2002

2. by Brett Blair, "Be Careful How You Live" as posted at <https://www.sermons.com/sermon/be-careful-how-you-live/1345733>