
Redeem the Time

Ephesians 5:15-20

A sermon preached at Duke Chapel on September 19, 2004 by the Rev. Dr. Richard Lischer
The Inaugural Sermon for Richard H. Brodhead, 9th President of Duke University

Dear friends, officials and guests of this university, President Brodhead, members of the Brodhead family, brothers and sisters: grace and peace be with you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Days like this one don't come round very often. Today is the ninth such day in the history of the university. *God* gives us days like this, instructs us to mark them well, and we creatures respond in the words of the ancient prayer, "Teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom."

For the past eleven years, President Brodhead, at about this time of year, it has been your job to stand up in Woolsey Hall at Yale and make a speech to incoming freshmen about the nature of the college experience that lies before them. For the better part of this weekend, however, you have found yourself in the listening position, as you are now, while others have made speeches about the nature of the college experience that lies before *you*, while others have sought just the right words with which to encourage you. I pray we have succeeded.

I have read all eleven of your speeches to the Yalies, and I have to say my favorite among them is the one in which you try to comfort those freshmen who secretly in their heart of hearts suspect they have been admitted to Yale by *mistake*. What a refreshing concept. (Since most of us assume we were *rejected* by mistake). Some believed they had been admitted due to a regional imbalance: perhaps Yale needed more Mississippians that year. Others felt they had gotten in because they were only good at sports or music or perhaps due to a clerical error, but bottom-line they just *knew* they weren't the right person for the school. I have not only read this speech, I have read it from a psychoanalytic perspective, and just in case it is a projection of some well-concealed insecurity in the speaker, let me quote back to you verbatim, President Brodhead, one of your own more pastoral sentences to the freshmen: "*You* are in fact the very person we wanted to come here, the one we chose in place of many others." On behalf of this community of faith, welcome to Duke.

When you stop to think, today's text would not make a bad freshman orientation speech. It begins with the lofty concepts of wisdom and the proper use of time and descends appropriately.

"Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise persons but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil . . . Don't be foolish, but know the will of the Lord . . . and don't get drunk . . . but be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Everything the Apostle says makes sense. It falls into the category of prudential wisdom, which is a polite way of saying we've heard it all before, if not from Paul from our parents, some of us as recently as four weeks ago from our parents. It all makes sense except for the phrase "redeeming the time," which makes no sense.

Our Time

In preparation for today (and not knowing about inaugural sermons), I visited the university Archives and read the inaugural sermons from presidencies gone by extending (as we would say only at Duke) *all the way back* to the 1940s. What I found was that each of the sermons I read captures the distinctive mood of its era; each achieves a kind of homiletic consensus about "our time," about the sort of world we live in, about the nature of the opportunities and challenges that lie before us.

These sermons cover the waterfront, from the heady optimism of the postwar 1940s to the unrest of the 60s to a soaring vision for the 90s. As much as I would have liked to stuff one of them into my jacket and spirited it out of the Archives for use today, I couldn't. I can't. I can't forget the words of T.S. Eliot who says somewhere in *Four Quartets*,

*For last year's words belong to last year's language,
And next year's words await another voice.*

So what about our time?

In no president's time will the words *terror*, *security*, and *enemy* dominate the script of politics and the media as in your time. In no president's time will the "culture wars," which were once seen as academic skirmishes, take on more ominous meaning than in your time. No president will be called upon to defend the very *idea* of a university as vigilantly as you will—at a time when every speech, every lecture, and every student assembly is monitored from a variety of perspectives for its adherence to public opinion, national security, or academic orthodoxy. At no time will the beauty of this place, with its gracious stone arches and ancient magnolia, *mask* so much uncertainty—as in your time.

No university president has taken over this green and sceptered isle with quite the same relation to the city outside it as you do. That is, to the non-Gothic, non-endowed city, with its 13% poverty rate and 500 homeless on any given night. Duke and Durham, Durham and Duke—it's been a rich and complex relationship, and in the past decade we've seen real progress in the partnership between the two. Still, no president has assumed this office amidst the acknowledged culture of gangs and guns and all the despair they bring—as you do.

Buying Back Time?

Now, I didn't choose this text because it says the days are evil. This is a great day! I chose it because it says they are redeemable.

"*Redeeming the time*," Paul says. The Greek word means literally to "buy back," but most modern translations flinch at the notion of buying back time and translate it, "making the most of the time," which takes us back to something we already know. We know how to make the most of our time. That's how we got here in the first place! You work hard, you have as many good experiences as possible, you encounter new ideas and data, master them, and then move on to the next level. Making the most of the time means recognizing an opportunity when you see one, and grabbing it.

"Redeeming the time" is a bit trickier. This is why it is so good to have an English professor as president! English professors know an impossible metaphor when they see one.

In the great American play *Our Town*, at the very end, one of the dead, a woman named Emily, is given permission to come back and re-live any one day of her choosing. Those of you who know the play remember that she chooses her twelfth birthday. Of course the audience has a feeling it isn't going to work out, and it doesn't—because when she returns, no one appreciates the exquisite quality of the day. On her way back to the cemetery she cries, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?" To which the Stage Manager replies, "No. The saints and poets, maybe."

When it's over its over, and time becomes the door you never opened, the path you will not take. It dictates a long list of places, opportunities, choices, and persons you will not get back. Redeem time? I don't think so.

The Redeemer

To bring redemption to bear on all that you face—and we with you—one has to see with the eyes of wisdom the enormity of the *sacrifice* that lies just beneath the phrase. When we worship God in this great church at the center of a vast intellectual city, we lay no claim to special information or expertise. We come in humility. But we *do* claim to know something about redemption. We know what it looks like. We know how it works. We worship a Redeemer who was baptized by immersion into time, who lived a hard, short life, filled with wisdom and love, and died. As his body lay in the tomb and the hours ticked by, time should have done its traditional job on him. It should have

erased him the way the sea claims sand castles, castles, and civilizations. It should have worn him smooth. Because it did not ultimately defeat him, it does not ultimately defeat us. On a day of new beginnings, his triumph sends a signal down the corridors of time and spirit that we can go on, take the next step, open the next chapter.

This letter to the Ephesians is not an emergency note dashed off in a crisis. It is a theological vision of the movement of all reality—of all that is represented in every lab, classroom, and auditorium on this and every other campus—toward some coherence. History is going someplace. It is moving toward an outcome in which all our yesterdays, lost moments, and missed opportunities may be reclaimed in the one we worship. For he is not only subject to time as its fool but rules it as its Lord. Only in the power that roils just beneath the text can Paul counsel us to do the impossible: go ahead, live the metaphor.

Why say all this now? Is this the right *time* to say this? It is, it is. Because I believe our university *wants* to redeem its time, but it doesn't know exactly how. It *can't* know how. How could it? It's a university, not a church. Its motto is not *religio* but *eruditio et religio*. It sponsors no theological approach to physics, chemistry, or Restoration Drama. But it wants to be more than an intellectual multiplex. It wants to be whole. But how? Some clues:

The iPod and the Book

This year's freshman class was given two gifts: one was the famous iPod, which, in case you dwell in total and abject darkness, is an elegant gizmo for downloading your music and making it instantly accessible. (You can also download the *Divine Comedy* on it, if you wish, or the works of Immanuel Kant). The second gift was a book called *Mountains Beyond Mountains* by Tracy Kidder, which all freshmen were asked to read.

These two gifts, the iPod and the book, send a mixed message to the freshman class. The first gift is a *thing* that apparently no one *can* be without. The second offers *wisdom* that no one *should* be without. The book tells the story of one of Duke's most distinguished graduates, Dr. Paul Farmer. He is a brilliant public health doctor and anthropologist, specializing in the treatment of drug-resistant TB in third-world settings. He has chosen to devote his entire life and considerable intellect to his clinics and caring for the poor in Haiti.

There's been a lot of talk about the free iPod, but I consider the book to be the more controversial of the two gifts. Because the book calls into question the iPod culture (of having everything when you want it). The book is a nagging reminder that while we have the privilege of being here, people just like us, made in God's image, are dying senselessly, needlessly, and brutally all over the world. It's a controversial book—or should be, if we knew the things that make for controversy—because it's another instance of the university bending the minds of the young in a certain direction, because this man Farmer is a case study in Ephesians 5:15, in redeeming the time, which he does by giving himself unreservedly to a people and a vocation until the people *become* his vocation.

After he had been working in Haiti for a while, the book says Dr. Farmer began wearing a large wooden cross outside his shirt. It's as if he was saying, "This notion of serving and giving yourself to others is not original with me." I plagiarized it from a guy who once said, "The son of man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many."

The Source of Wisdom

What the cross of Jesus Christ stands for does not lie outside the scope of a quality education but is its soul. This university was founded in the Roaring Twenties of twentieth century—not one of your great ages of faith. It was founded by people who actually believed that the message of Jesus Christ can inform a thoroughly modern, Roaring Twenties university, and that such a university so constituted and so dedicated can help redeem its era.

When the other Paul wrote to the Ephesians he said, "Don't be stupid; be wise." The force of the word stupid in Greek is "Don't waste what you've got." Indeed, in the next verse he says, "Don't get wasted."

The president's job, if I may be so bold, is to help us all—not only the freshmen among us—not to get wasted or to waste the precious vision we have been given. In many schools the unacknowledged aim of the curriculum is to help you *avoid* a life like Paul Farmer's, in which you are *not* rewarded with things, in which you do *not* avoid the suffering of others. Now that's what I call a waste.

For one day, *some* of us will care for a parent with Alzheimer's. One day, *some* of us will care for a child with Down's syndrome. One day, *all* of us will find ourselves in a situation from which it is impossible to move on or up. Wouldn't it be fantastic if there was something about this education that prepared us for that, as well?

It was said of the great philosopher Hegel, who, by the way, was one of the last philosophers to claim universal knowledge for his system (that is to say, if you met him in the Faculty Commons and asked him his field he would have said, 'Everything')—it was said of Hegel by Kierkegaard, no less, that Hegel understood everything there is to know—except one teeny detail: what it is to live and die in the world.

You can graduate from this university with nearly everything Hegel had, but if you do, we owe you a refund. Because we were aiming for something higher. We were shooting for the moon! We're going for wisdom, the wisdom that will help you redeem your era. I think that when Farmer wore that cross he did it as a confession of faith, because he believed that this whole groaning creation *has* in fact been redeemed by a great suffering love.

Jesus goes a little outside the curriculum to show us what it means to live and die in the world and for the world. For those who follow him, the cross represents not a sidebar or footnote, but the path to true wisdom—the wisdom that unites everything you know, everything you are, and everything you hope to be.

So, this is our time—and, as of this weekend, it is *your* time, dear friend. It is a scary time, evil (as the Apostle says), exciting, uncharted—and, oh yes, redeemable.

Thanks be to God.