



CARPE DIEM – SEIZE THE DAY
Luke 7:1-10, Deuteronomy 26:5-11

It was a special moment for the entire Ritz family when we first saw the movie **“Dead Poets Society.”** Who can forget the sterling performance of Robin Williams, as he portrayed the leading character Mr. Keating, who goes back to teach at his stodgy old alma mater called Welton Academy? The students affectionately refer to it as ‘Hellton Academy.’ In this rigid system of education – Mr. Keating challenged them to be free – to think outside the box. They read the old masters, but in a new way.

In one of the many memorable scenes he has his class go out into the foyer to look at the pictures of former students of the school who have long since died. He tells the boys to put their ears up against the pictures of these former students of the school – who have passed from life to death. He urges them to learn and listen to what they said. As they do, Mr. Keating whispers as if from the grace, “Carpe Diem” – seize the day.

As we gather on this Sunday before Memorial Day, when we remember our fallen heroes – as a nation we put our ears up against the memory of the dead and listen and learn from what they have to teach us. From Jamestown to Plymouth Rock – from Valley Forge to Gettysburg they whisper back to us as well, ‘Carpe Diem – Seize the day.’

Our lesson today from the gospel of Luke shares with us the amazing story of a Roman centurion or captain who does exactly that – he seizes the moment. The very act of seeking out Jesus is almost as noteworthy as what happens in this dramatic encounter. The Roman centurion is what we would call today an outsider. In matters of faith and religion – he was a Gentile with no training in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Racially, he was non-Jewish – most likely a Roman or Greek. Politically, he was an esteemed military man, working for and representing the Roman Empire – which the Jews deeply resented.

In light of the story – we don’t ever know his name – only his position and power. We know that he has a servant that he held dear and precious.

We further know that this military officer did not consider himself worthy to even approach Jesus. He sends a delegation of Jewish elders on his behalf. This military

officer risks everything to seek out an itinerant Jewish Rabbi. Can you imagine how many barriers he climbed over to 'seize the day' – carpe Diem!

I wonder how many people in the United States of America have an impulse or longing to seek out Jesus – but for one reason or another do not. Some barrier prevents them from seizing the moment.

Recently Ray Voran asked me to come and share my testimony – my story – on Wednesday night with the youth. I shared with them that – despite the challenging neighborhood and culture of death and violence I was exposed to – I was grateful for parents and a church family who encouraged me to seize the moment and become all I could be in Christ Jesus. There was a road less traveled that could make all the difference in the world.

Yesterday I attended the state track meet at Shippensburg University. There was a young lady from Easton Pennsylvania, who not only set a new state record in the 800 meter race, but a new national record as well. She seized the moment. During the final lap the entire crowd stood up and literally cheered and rooted her on. You could sense the energy that she gained from such a response.

That is what we try to do in our work here as a church – to literally help others in their course of faith to seize their moment as well.

Several years ago Frank Court told the story of a student at Iowa State University who took to selling magazine subscriptions for additional income. He determined that a likely customer might be the president of the University. The student was greeted at the door by the president's wife who was able to resist his sales pitch by saying that her husband already received more magazines than he could read.

The student assured her that he understood and turned to leave. It was then the president's wife saw something she had not noticed before. The student was crippled. She felt bad that she had turned him down, and probably out of a twinge of guilt called out to him and said, "I did not know you were a cripple." The student responded that his being a cripple was a result of having polio when he was a child. The woman then said, "My, how being a cripple must color your life." The young man brightly responded, "It certainly does, but thank God I can choose the color!"

Dr. Court said, "How indebted we are to those radiant individuals who bring a perspective of hope and life into a difficult situation . . . Such persons are not born that way but choose to become that way as they pick their attitudes."¹

Yes, we are grateful for those who seize the day – and color their world with faith and hope – rather than despair.

To be a Christian is to be enrolled in a great ongoing story of those who have experienced this dramatic divine/human encounter and have surrendered their lives to

God. There is a reason every week in our Sunday School classes, Bible studies and worship services that we read and study a lesson from the Bible. We learn of those who – by faith – seized the day – and those unfortunately who did not. We learned and are inspired to seize the day in our pilgrimage of faith as well.

It was from Dr. Fred B. Craddock that I learned that anyone who can't remember further back than his or her own birth is an orphan. For us – the journey begins with Abram and Sarai – and then further back to Adam and Eve. If you don't know your identity – there are forces at work in this world that will gladly give you one. Instead of you seizing the moment – they seize and paralyze you. Your identity is directly related to your destiny.

This brings me nicely to our Old Testament lesson for today. Almost all great Old Testament scholars believe this portion of sacred scripture to be one of the earliest know creeds of the people of Israel. It was recited as a creed to keep the people's memory of the mighty acts of God alive in their history. Its purpose was to connect – or reconnect – the people of faith to their origin and identity. Sadly from our gospel lesson in **Luke 7**, we see this amazing story of faith had been forgotten by Israel – but known and claimed by one outside the faith and tribe. This book reminds us that we are not orphans – but heirs of a great inheritance. This allows us to seize the day – and to color our world with the amazing power of faith.

The proper use of memory is never to relegate us to live in the past – but actually to free us for future and fruitful service. A colleague tells the story of his brother-in-law who took piano lessons for years on a Wurlitzer model. He knew that Middle C was always beside the “W” imprinted on his piano. This was his starting point.

However, one day at a recital – he went forward to play his assigned piece – and it was a beautiful piano – but a Yamaha. He froze. No “W.” He could not find Middle C. His piano teacher – recognizing the situation – placed the right finger on Middle C – and beautiful music was heard by all.²

As we reflect on this Memorial Day weekend what is the Middle C missing in your life? What is keeping you from seizing the moment? What is the Middle C missing for our national heritage and identity? What is the Middle C missing in the body of Christ in this land and the world?

Yes, we can never know whom we are without our past – without those persons who – in decisive ways – have left their indelible mark upon us – those who have helped us seize the day.

The late Loren Eiseley shared of a mysterious but real life event that helped to change his life – to seize the day. The incident happened in the old Penn Station terminal in New York City. As he started to descend a flight of stairs to reach the platform he saw his former teacher and colleague who had been dead for 10 years standing at the bottom of the stairway. It unnerved him. His heart started to pound in

his chest. As the two men met each other on the stairway – he opened his mouth to say hello – but nothing came out. The man walked right past him to be lost in the crowds of New York City. Loren Eiseley said he was never able to fully solve the mystery – but on the train ride back to Philadelphia he made a life-changing decision. He went back to his office and wrote a letter of resignation. He had been at his administrative job at the University of Pennsylvania far too long. It was time to get back to his first love, which was the work of anthropology and archaeology for which he was able trained and mentored. He seized the day. It was as though the past whispered to him, ‘Seize the day – Carpe Diem – remember who you are.’”

As a freshman in College in 1970 – I was required to read George Orwell’s provocative book, 1984. The book – the very first thing to be sacrificed for the New World Order and system is the history and journey of the past.

On this Memorial Day weekend let us reclaim the truth that we are whom we remember. Furthermore, the best way to remember those who become part of us – and whose legacy helped to make us who we are is to become “living reminders of them” and what they did passed onto us – which is precious and never forgotten.

So let us observe some moments of silence – to those whose memories we hold dear – and for those who died in the service of our country – and the cause of freedom and liberty for all – and help us to seize the day.

(Moment of silence)

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

¹ I first heard this story from Dr. Clarence J. Forsberg, now retired United Methodist minister.

² This story is attributed to the late Dr. William Hinson.

PASTOR’S NOTE: Pastor Eric would like to acknowledge the influence of a sermon by Dr. Thomas Lane Butts of Monroeville, Alabama, upon this writing. Dr. Butts is one of my mentors in the craft of sermon writing and preparation.