Devotional on Ecclesiastes 7:1-12 cf. Matt. 5:3-12

The different choices we make that shape us into becoming better people are often forced on us. Not always, sometimes we have an insight of the sublime, of the beautiful and the true and it changes us, reshapes our choices and brings a renewed focus on God’s kingdom, but often it’s the a severe illness, a financial crisis, a relationship gone bad, the addiction troubles of a son or a daughter or any number of things that bring us up short and help us to re-examine how and where we’ve been going. Are the values we’re living the value we believe to be truly the most “valuable?”

This insight is a way to read the beatitudes; instead of thinking of sorrow, or loss or pain as an indicator of having done something wrong, or as failing which some forms of faith are prone to do: if you’re not prospering, if you’re not healthy it must be because you’ve displeased God in some way. But Jesus says the opposite, it’s actually failure in the eyes of the world, in the eyes of much religion, that is the prerequisite to drawing close to God, to participating in the Kingdom of God.

Because there are not many passages like it in the Hebrew scriptures, I think Jesus may have Ecclessiastes 7 in mind when looking out at the crowds he says these very off-putting things.

Qohelet dares to say that “the day of mourning is better than the day of feasting”; that “sorrow is better than laughter.” He doubles down “the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.” This wisdom, like an inheritance, Qohelet says, is a good thing; it is a shelter; it is *the* preserver of life!

What can be going on here? Both in Ecclesiastes and in Jesus’ famous beatitudes.? First, to be honest these are completely counter-intuitive. They are completely foreign to what the majority of our cultural Christianity has bought into.

We celebrate feasts! We celebrate accomplishments and pleasure and holidays and health and inheritances. You’ve heard me talk about how my favourite verse in the Bible is when Jesus says, “the thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy but I have come that you may have life, and that, abundantly!”

My son and daughter-in-law just sold their place in Halifax in preparation for a move back to the west coast sometime next year. Despite the reality of the east coast reality market and despite Covid they made a profit. Our first reaction wasn’t, gee, bummer that you succeeded but “hey, when we see you, we’ll open a bottle of champagne together!”

So we need to be honest, this is counter-intuitive. So what’s going on here? Well, a couple of things at least, one has to do with God and the other with our living into our destiny as the image of God.

First of all then, and this is at the heart of our faith, we don’t attain God’s favour by “succeeding.” We don’t experience more of God’s presence because “we’ve made it.” Indeed, if we’ve striven after gain, after wealth, after pleasure or notoriety than we’ve more than likely missed God along the way.

There is a way of life, both Ecclesiastes and Jesus affirm, of working hard, of enjoying life, without trying to master it, without trying to “live large” to “grasp” after wealth. As Dick Martin was sharing with us last week, the key is trusting that God is good, wants to give to us what we need and then wants us to share what we’ve been given.

But back to when life *isn’t* enjoyable, *isn’t* pleasurable or *not* satisfying: God is with us in the midst of that in love; God has not withdrawn favour from us. Our feelings tell us that God has but in fact, often our lot is the result of the oppressive conditions foisted on us by the wealthy and powerful. This was certainly the case for the majority of the folks who came to see Jesus.

Even so, in God’s grace, these conditions, maybe even *especially* these conditions can be doorways to the life that really is life!

In Ecclesiastes, Qohelet, impersonating King Solomon, is admitting that his life can’t protect him from the ultimate “failure,” the ultimate lot of us all: death. If this is true, taking that central truth deep into our bones is akin to standing in awe of God, it is one of the first principles of learning to live well: stand in awe of God, notice the shortness of life, be aware that when difficult times come, even death, it is better than ignorance because it wakes us up.

This wisdom is the shelter we need, money too is a shelter, but, ironically it does not preserve our life, whereas wisdom does. In other words, money, which as Qohelet observes is often gained by extortion or bribes, ironically provides a false shelter, it’s like covering yourself with a blanket and thinking that because you can’t see the tornado that’s coming it won’t take you away.

But the kind of wisdom advocated by Ecclesiastes and Jesus helps us “keep it real,” helps us “see more clearly” and by doing so helps us “let go” of striving, let go of trying so damn hard to protect our bodies at the expense of our souls.

Steve Jobs of Apple fame said this after he was diagnosed with incurable pancreatic cancer, “Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life.  
  
Almost everything--all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure--these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.  
  
Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.  
  
No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet, death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it, and that is how it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of life. It's life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new.”

Those words spoken by a practicing Buddhist are right in line with Ecclesiastes and Jesus’ message.

Here I have to say a hard truth; much modern religion is about escaping “keeping it real,” especially if it is based in performance worship, or with all kinds of gadgets and false promises.

We seek healing for our pain via the path of truth; by facing the truth of God and the truth of the human condition.

Does this mean this *all* we think about? My youngest son who is taking his PhD in philosophy says “I’m already dead,” to which my response is “best pick-up line ever! That will get you a lot of dates!” He’s right, but it’s not all we’re to focus on!

I grew up in a serious home so that doesn’t sound strange to me, nor weird.

I gravitated towards Denise partly because she grew up in a hard-working Catholic family who also knew how to have a good time; Denise’s infectious laugh literally bowled my heard right over! And as we’ve lived together these past 34 years she’s helped me become way more balanced and aware of life’s less serious sides.

Now, with the help of her, and much better theology, the Holy Spirit is helping me learn that in God’s grace all of life, the good, the bad and ugly offer me wisdom on how to live life better in the short time that I have.

Death is our great enemy the apostle Paul says, yet in God’s grace it convinces us to die to self and let go of control and join God’s perspective. When we begin to live as if there is nothing to lose true joy and patience and gentleness become the marks on our souls and in our interactions.

The path to resurrection passes through death’s door and as we pass through small and large “letting gos” that preview death, we are offered opportunities offered on no other path.