Keeping it Real!
*Ecclesiastes 1:12-13a, 2:1-13, 24-26; Matthew 11:16-19, 28-30*
Part II: “The Master Key”

When do you feel most alive? I’ve heard performers, whether singers, whether actors say, “I only feel truly alive when I’m singing, when I’m performing.” Which makes me wonder, what do they feel when they’re paying the bills, when they have to clean the dishes or sit in a doctor’s office?

Is it really “less than alive” or worse, “all empty” when the fans go home? What about you? What about me? Is life “empty” for me if I’m not fulfilling my vocation as a priest or not engaging in the things I really enjoy?

Maybe even more poignantly, is life “over” when a loved one dies (yes, it does feel that way, at least at the height of grief). When the inevitable diminishments of life begin to affect our bodies, our ambitions, our capabilities, are we somehow “less alive?”

These are questions that may make us uncomfortable but the book of Ecclesiastes is not afraid to ask them.

Rather, the writer—we’re giving him the name Qohelet from the Title of the book in Hebrew, translated into Greek as Ecclesiastes and meaning either the Preacher, the Teacher or the Churchman, but writing in costume as it were, as if he’s King Solomon (see last week’s sermon intro for fuller explanations)—goes about asking these questions in the teeth of the reality that everything in life slips away from us, can’t be controlled, is over before it feels like it’s begun.

Last week we noticed that the fact that life is a “mere breath” begins to shimmer through and around everything when we notice it, when we don’t try to hide from it.

Now, in our 2nd sermon on this book and in this section of the book we find the persona of Solomon shines through. He was the man who had everything. If you go to a book like 1 Kings there you read how Solomon took advantage of the hard-won military and political victories of his father David, building a legacy that combined wisdom, wealth and sensuality. He was the one who ostensibly proved you could have your cake and eat it too!

Under Solomon, Israel would achieve it’s greatest economic, geographic and political heights. This smallish country of sheep and goat herders actually built a navy and found recognition even in far-flung realms. So if anyone was in a position to reflect on the significance of human exploits, the pursuit of wisdom and joy and what it all means, it was Solomon.

And so if I were to give you an outline of what is covered in today’s reading I might say that Solomon looks at Wisdom, Pleasure and Accomplishment, the things that most people find the most desirable in human living, the things that many people would say make us feel “most alive” and examines them from two perspectives.

Looking at what he says about wisdom, and if I was to summarize—a dangerous business when it comes to Ecclesiastes, so double-check my work please—I would say that, in a kind of paradox, the advantage of wisdom is that it helps you understand what wisdom can do and what it can’t do. It can help you appreciate the limited perspective humans have; it can help you understand that life is mysterious, often extremely difficult. This is how I think we might interpret the line “it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with.” Wisdom brings realism, wisdom is what helps us wrestle with the deeply disturbing truth that everything is a mere breath, which again is one of the strongest themes of the book.

So that’s what wisdom can do. What it can’t do is help us “gain” in some ultimate sense. It may help us make more money, live with more clear-headedness and realism, know more; wisdom can help us accomplish “things,” but it can’t eliminate the sorrow that comes from realizing that we can’t “keep” what we’ve done or accumulated.

Personally, I’ve tried to pursue wisdom through my studies and I’d have to say there has been a great deal more joy in that than “Solomon” is willing to admit. But maybe the reason for that is best left till we engage the gospel passage.

In playing out the part Qohelet then says well, if that’s what wisdom is good for “come now, I will make a test of pleasure.” The word translated as pleasure here is translated as “enjoyment” or “merriment.” It carries the connotation of not just momentary thrills but a deeper gladness of heart as well, something approaching joy.

And he played all the games that people play, that we long to play. And here we need to get honest. If someone were to offer you 10,000,000 dollars would there be someone out there who wouldn’t take it?

What if I were to tell you that trying to manage that money, that trying to be fair with it and use it wisely, constantly wondering if you’ve compromised your soul because you bought that care you’ve always dreamed of driving, or bought the best grand piano money could buy or, in my case, booked golf lessons with the best teachers etc. would actually make you more anxious, more aware of the “mere breath” nature of life as you try to use that money to have “all the experiences you could never previously have?”

I’m not just making that up, that’s essentially what Solomon says, that’s essentially what those who study people who receive a large inheritance or win the lottery discover. There’s an immediate high and then there’s leveling off of enjoyment and the added headaches of ethical and management concerns.

And yet…almost all of us would take the money! Such is the deep pull of human desire. Of course, gladness of heart, joy, pleasure are indeed good in themselves. But it is the “pursuit” of them in the hope of gain that is the mere chasing of the wind. We can’t “gain” them through an accumulation of wealth, through losing ourselves in building our dream home, or going on that dream holiday or marrying George Clooney (right Denise?) or whomever you swoon over, let alone collecting a series of affairs as Solomon did! Like a drug, the momentary elation will level off and then another hit is required.

I’m reminded of Mr. Burns in the Simpsons who, in response to Homer’s observation that “you’re the richest man I know,” replies, “Yes, but I’d trade it all for more.”

Now I don’t say this, and I don’t think Solomon is saying this to dissuade us from experiencing life. The end of our passage talks about this; with “vanity,” that is, the fact that life is a “mere breath” still in view, he says, “there is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil.”

This, in itself isn’t a very satisfying way to end, we might wonder, what’s the point of all the angst if we’re right back to “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die!” Fair enough.

Sometimes, and I think this is part of the subtlety and wisdom of Ecclesiastes itself, we’re meant to get to the end of a section and ask, “what’s missing from this picture?”

The picture Qohelet paints with words is like modern art or a modern novel, it’s beautiful as far as it goes but there’s something gnawing at us when we look at it, where’s the unifying yin to the yang. If yang refers to the contraction, the diminishment, the mere breath nature of human life, then where is the expansive, eternal yin?

And that makes us ask, “wait a minute, where’s God?” And if God is mentioned, what’s God like in Ecclesiastes?

Well, to be true, God is a bit hollow in Ecclesiastes, although that is not totally fair, in this passage for instance, God is the one who has authored the fraughtness, the sorrow of human existence. But, as we’ve seen that’s the perspective when we try to “gain” or “capture” wisdom, or pleasure or accomplishment.

Near the end of our text Solomon/Qohelet says, “for apart from him [that is God] who can eat or have enjoyment?” Here we are brought into a least the hint of partnership with God, a partnership that was more than hinted at in Genesis when it says that all of us are created to image God and to be the regents of creation. God is the Giver

This my friends is the master Key! What Jesus so beautifully says “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens [maybe burdens of unfilled desire because of your pursuits!] and I will give you rest [satisfaction, a sense of fulfillment and joy]. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me [learn God’s ways through Jesus].

Then, as we see, even our eating and drinking becomes not a selfish pursuit, but something we do with God and with others and with others, for them!

The master key is giving! God is the Giver and to live as God’s image, God’s regent is to enjoy all that God has given us to desire but with God and others in view. Even as we eat and drink and build and make love and travel and cook and watch tv and go to the beach we do so as God’s image, as God’s envoy; experiencing the freedom to creatively live into what it might look like to reflect God’s love to others around us and towards ourselves.

It is living into “giving” and from the fact that we are joined to Jesus the giver that enables us to truly enjoy what is in front of us for truth be told when we imagine joy as accumulating we miss the singular, if we possess a whole field of roses do we appreciate the one rose in our backyard?

When we live from the central affirmations we will say together in a moment: to live in respect for creation while loving and serving other, while seeking just and resisting evil, we are not merely suppressing our deepest cravings for sensual pleasure, then we are channeling that desire in a fashion that actually allows us to experience life in a way that is fulfilling, that scratches the itch in the deep part of our soul.

I want to testify to this: pursuing this work, my studies, my service joined with God’s presence even when the work has been difficult, even when I’ve felt like quitting, even when I’ve failed has indeed been an “easy yoke,” because of God’s giving and forgiving towards me.

I’ve been blessed to come to know ordinary as the extraordinary. I don’t have a well-known reputation, I don’t have a lot of accomplishments to my name, but truth be told, I wouldn’t trade my life “for more.”

Rest for your souls, it’s real, and Christ, in conversation with Qohelet is offering it today!