

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – July 31, 2022

²Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

¹²I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, ¹³applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. ¹⁴I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

^{2:18}I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me ¹⁹—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, ²¹because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²²What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? ²³For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Nobody likes a critic, they say.

When our 9:15 Christian education hour cohort dove into the Wisdom literature last fall, we explored these rather vexing books of the Scripture through the lens given us by a series from The Bible Project.

The scholar commentators simplified the perspectives of each Wisdom teacher as a character: the idealistic, vibrant young woman, that's Proverbs. The snarky, middle-aged man

in black turtleneck, puffing smugly on his pipe, the “critic” of Ecclesiastes. And finally the white-bearded sage of Job, arguably the oldest book in the whole Bible.

They complement one another. But there’s a likable character in each of the proverbial Lady Wisdom and the wizened sage.

Though not everyone loves the Proverbs, with its pithy sayings sometimes a bit too simplistic; nor Job with its confounding logic and underlying unfairness.

But neither book is questioned much in regards to whether it belongs in the canon of Scripture. Love them or hate them, they’re undeniably full of Wisdom.

But Ecclesiastes? It’s such an enigma. History shows it barely made the cut in the compilation of the Hebrew bible and some rabbis weren’t all that happy to have it in the end. It contains none of the most enduring themes throughout the Scripture of a God who lives in deep relationship with a

people set apart as God's very own. For the Qoheleth, the "teacher," of Ecclesiastes, God seems very much distant and aloof. For the reader looking for encouragement from God's word, this book is often found lacking, save for its brief glimmer of hope found one verse after our selection from this morning's lectionary lesson terminates: "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?"

It's better known by its paraphrase, "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow, we die."

Along with the satisfying air of frustration that is "Vanity of vanities!" at the outset and the later poetic proclamation of a time for everything under heaven, that's about all that most glean from Ecclesiastes and otherwise most dismiss its pervasively pessimistic prose.

It seems everybody's a critic, they say.

But isn't that true? Maybe we shy from Ecclesiastes' harsh observations because they are all too real. We don't want the inspired Word of God to tell us, yeah, life sucks.

But in all reality, life itself is prone to telling us, yeah, life sucks. There's no denying it. We all question and can feel as if we toil in vain. We strive to make meaning that isn't always there.

I think there's value in Ecclesiastes *because* the Teacher admits life is hard and it's a struggle to make sense of why God set things in motion only for them to be this way. The life of faith is not meant to be endless cheer and unrealistic optimism and a toxic form of positivity. And if that's the message of the Church, I don't blame most people for rejecting it.

But Christians ... get depressed. Christians get cynical. Christians endure sleepless nights when our minds refuse to

rest. We can have a healthy dose of skepticism, and realistically sometimes we are gonna have an *unhealthy* measure of skepticism. Ecclesiastes can speak to us when we aren't ready yet for an encouraging word but we need an affirmative word that recognizes our situation in all its unvarnished rawness.

This book of wisdom doesn't reflect the caring nature of God all that well, no. But it does reflect a faith in God. A persistent, pesky, almost annoying faith. It permits faith to be like that sometimes. The Teacher wants to give up, has found work and the pursuit of knowledge fleeting and not enough. And yet keeps at it. And yet doesn't run from God but keeps wrestling with God and God's mysterious ways.

Ecclesiastes carries its own set of recurring themes. This "vanity," a translation that's a bit odd. That doesn't capture the essence of what I think the Teacher is trying to grasp. Which is literally an essence that cannot be grasped.

***Hevel*, the Hebrews called it. A vapor. Something you can see, you can almost reach out and touch but once you do, it's gone. You can't really take hold and keep it. It gets away from you.**

It's a great metaphor for life experience. Nothing really lasts. Memories can be wonderful but they can't really be relived. But yet this word encourages us to enjoy these moments. One day they will be gone forever. In God's word is permission to live in the moment and let tomorrow's worries be *tomorrow's* worries.

By contrast, Luke's Gospel message gives us the example of he who sets himself up to eat, drink and be merry in a future that will never be. These messages might seem opposite of one another but one's motivations matter. The Qoheleth's cranky faith remains ultimately in God beyond his understanding but present nonetheless and a marvel despite the *hevel* nature of it all. The rich old fool in Jesus' parable

lives what is often presented as the American dream. Work hard and store up a treasure to enjoy in old age. And hope against hope you've got enough life left in you to enjoy what YOU earned. Take care of number one because nobody else is going to look out for you. That's quite the opposite of faith.

Hard work is good. Hard work is fine. But a fine piece of colloquial wisdom tells us no one ever lamented on their death bed that they didn't work hard enough or put in too few hours, whether at the office or the salt mine. Toil can become an idol rather than a virtue.

Life is meant to be lived together with the people you love and the people whom God loves and ideally you can get to where that set are one and the same. No, there's no guarantee anyone else will be wise, foolish or where they will fall in between with what you leave behind. So don't be so worried about it. You can't control that.

But you do have the agency to do what you will with the moment you are in. To look outward or look inward. Nobody, not your greatest cheerleader, not your most nagging judge, not your most insightful guru, nobody can figure that out for you and make you a puppet to their will or whim. Not even God.

And for that, even if begrudgingly or with a roll of the eyes and a deep sigh, thanks be. To God.