

**Eat Your Bread in Gladness**  
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**Readings**

Ecclesiastes 9:1-9

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.  
What do the people gain from all the toil  
at which they toil under the sun?  
A generation goes, and a generation comes,  
but the earth remains forever.  
The sun rises and the sun goes down,  
and hurries to the place where it rises.  
The wind blows to the south,  
and goes around to the north;  
Round and round goes the wind,  
and on its circuits the wind returns.  
All streams run to the sea,  
but the sea is not full;  
To the place where the streams flow,  
there they continue to flow.  
All things are wearisome;  
more than one can express;  
The eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
or the ear with hearing...

“Joe Heller” by Kurt Vonnegut

True story, Word of Honor:  
Joseph Heller, an important and funny writer now dead,  
and I were at a party given by a billionaire  
on Shelter Island.  
I said, “Joe, how does it make you feel  
to know that our host only yesterday  
may have made more money  
than your novel ‘Catch-22’  
has earned in its entire history?”  
And Joe said, “I’ve got something he can never have.”  
And I said, “What on earth could that be, Joe?”  
And Joe said, “The knowledge that I’ve got enough.”  
Not bad! Rest in Peace!

## Sermon

One summer during my college years I read the Book of Ecclesiastes (the name of the book is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *Koholeth*, which means preacher or teacher. And it has ever since been one of my touchstone texts.

Now, you might well ask, what would be appealing to a nineteen-year-old about a book whose writer pretty much proclaims the futility of... everything? We heard the opening lament earlier, in the first reading – and in reflecting on its meaning it is important to know that the English word “vanity” is a translation of the Hebrew *hebel* which means vapor, and so something insubstantial and fleeting. I’ll repeat just a few verses:

Vanity of vanities... All is vanity.  
What do the people gain from all the toil...  
A generation goes, and a generation comes...  
The sun rises and the sun goes down...  
Round and round goes the wind...  
All streams run to the sea,  
    but the sea is not full...  
All things are wearisome;  
    more than one can express;  
The eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
    or the ear with hearing...

And so the writer of Ecclesiastes goes on, returning to these themes throughout the book: nothing lasts, nothing we do apparently has any enduring value, we will not be remembered more than a generation hence.

And at age 19 I found this comforting? Inspiring? What else is going on in this book that would lead to its appeal not only to me at 19, yet still decades later? What is going on in this book that would have led not just me, but thousands, millions to have been inspired and comforted by its message over many generations? What would, for example, lead the physician, essayist, and social reformer Havelock Ellis, writing a century or so ago, to affirm that as we set off on our life’s journey, “you may spare yourself some unhappiness if, beforehand, you slip the Book of Ecclesiastes beneath your arm”?

Well, in his essay, Ellis alludes to another message which is sprinkled throughout Ecclesiastes side by side along with the heavy doses of world-weary cynicism, even despair; and this is the message that gave me my title this morning, and that offers the counterpoint and response to the teacher’s world weariness. It is a message appears most notably and forcefully in chapter 9, about three quarters through the book, by which point we could hardly have missed being reminded that nothing endures, that everything passes, that the meaning of our lives is woefully in doubt. Yes, all that is true, yet we are also told:

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

(I was intrigued to discover the other day, by the way, that Theta Tau, a professional engineering collegiate fraternity founded in 1904, has as its motto words from this passage, using the King James translation: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might...”)

Well then... we might now ask... how *does* our writer/teacher get from world weariness and despair to acceptance and even gladness, joy? And is his message here any better than the jaundiced view that we should “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die”?

Well, to better understand what our old friend is getting at, we need to know a little more about the journey he recounts.

First, it is worth our knowing that the book was traditionally attributed to the legendarily wise King Solomon. And though this attribution is considered by most scholars to be unlikely, it *is* likely that whomever did write the book, it was probably an older man of some wealth and power (or a wise teacher who fruitfully imagined what it might have been like to have been such a man, to have been Solomon), in any case a man reflecting on the nature of life, on appropriate goals for life... and doing so in a quite personal way – we might say surprisingly personal for an ancient biblical document.

With this in mind, then, after that opening passage – “Vanity of vanity... What do the people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? ... All things are wearisome; more than one can express...” after all this, our writer, the preacher/teacher goes on to share his story.

He tells us that in response to his experience of the weariness and apparent futility of life he had tried many paths. He tried pleasure: the proverbial wine, women, and song. Pleasure didn’t work, didn’t fulfill. He tried power: power as a political leader who ruled over many, who controlled a kingdom. Power didn’t work, didn’t fulfill. He tried accumulation of material possessions. This too didn’t work or fulfill. And he tried wisdom and knowledge. Surprisingly, he reports that the path of wisdom didn’t work either, failed to fulfill – better than being a fool, he said, but still, the wise and the foolish meet the same fate in the end.

What then?

Well, first we might do well to back up a step and ask just what was it that our writer, teacher, preacher was seeking?

Well... what might we say are most human beings seeking?

What are *you* seeking?

This past week a number of us had some lively conversation in our “Back to the Beginning” Bible class concerning Ecclesiastes and for part of our time we explored this very question – what was the writer of this book seeking? And do we share a similar search?

Perhaps it is pretty clear. Using some of the words which surfaced during the class, it seems that our middle-aged, world-weary writer was seeking meaning, fulfillment, authenticity; and in a world which he experienced as insubstantial and transient he was seeking (or thought he was seeking) something substantial, something enduring. Maybe he was simply seeking what we call happiness. Maybe all of these things. Maybe all of this amounts to the same thing.

And aren’t *we* seeking meaning, fulfillment, authenticity, that which endures... happiness or at least a measure of contentment?

In his search, then, how *did* the author of Ecclesiastes get from weariness and futility to his affirmation and recommendation to “go, eat your bread with enjoyment...”?

Actually, I don’t think the answer is terribly complex. And I find it easiest to understand, interestingly, through a Buddhist lens. In fact, a few of you may remember that a long time ago I preached a sermon on Ecclesiastes which I titled “The Bible’s Hidden Buddhist.”

To begin with, the author of Ecclesiastes began with the a very similar diagnosis of the source of his dissatisfaction with life as had the Buddha: life is transient, everything is like a

vapor, nothing lasts, our lives all end in death; and, further (quite explicitly for the Buddha, yet clearly implicit for Ecclesiastes) our psychological and spiritual suffering is caused by our seeking after satisfaction in the wrong places or in the wrong ways, grasping after that which cannot be grasped – pleasure, power, possessions... even wisdom itself.

The treatment for our malaise, for our existential questions? Well, the Buddha has the Noble Eightfold Path (Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Mindfulness, etc.); and Ecclesiastes isn't quite so organized. But here, too, there are great similarities. To put it in contemporary terms: we need to let go of our unrealistic expectations for life, let go of the idea that we can control the future, let go of always wanting things to go our way. Instead, we should let ourselves be present in the moment wholeheartedly: yes, eat your bread in gladness... enjoy the companionship of your life's partner, your family, your friends... do your work, the tasks that are before you, with all your might... and live according to the rules of decency and goodness that society has created.

Ecclesiastes adds an explanation that would be foreign to the Buddha, at least on the face of it. Ecclesiastes affirms that in relation to all this "God has long ago approved what you do." We have permission from the highest authority!

What does *that* mean? We could put it another way – in humanistic language perhaps acceptable to either Ecclesiastes or the Buddha:

This is simply the way things are (to everything a season, to quote the well known passage from Ecclesiastes 3), and we would find contentment, even happiness, by accepting life as it is given and doing the best we can, with no frantic grasping in relation to pleasure, power, or possessions, or in relation to what might or might not come afterwards. As the *Desiderata*, that well known little poetic essay by Max Ehrmann, a piece which includes more than a few echoes of Ecclesiastes, puts it "You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here."

So... eat your bread with gladness... with enjoyment.

But... for us, who inherit a Puritan culture and mindset, this might be easier preached than practiced.

Eat your bread with gladness? What have we done to deserve our bread? Our gladness and enjoyment? And why should we be enjoying ourselves, eating and drinking and taking pleasure in one another's company, when others are suffering (a homeless man in Boston, a refugee in Darfur, a citizen of Baghdad?) What right do we have to enjoy? Shouldn't we instead be devoting every moment to alleviating all this suffering? Shouldn't we defer our own fleeting happiness, following a Buddhist Bodhisattva ideal or a Christ-like ideal, until everyone is free of suffering, is saved?

Yet the text says that in this world of both weal and woe, we should also enjoy (which is, it must be said, different from his the writer's earlier indulgence in and grasping after pleasure – here is talking about wholehearted presence, not indulgence). In fact it may well be all the more important to enjoy the gifts of creation when we can (which could be most of the time actually)... to enjoy... even or especially in this world filled with challenges and too much suffering, in the world as it is. After all, why else would we find the world worth saving or improving, if we weren't able to find enjoyment in it? Further, whatever else we might be doing in our lives to improve the wide world, to shed peace and bring justice, we can also be creating a little more joy, a little more happiness close to home and hearth, by enjoying ourselves with one another. The Dalai Lama, who lives a life utterly committed to the betterment of all life and who has known more than his share of sorrow, smiles and laughs all the time. And we are told that Jesus ate and drank and enjoyed companionship at the feast table.

Even putting aside such lofty examples, learning to take pleasure and satisfaction in what we *have* and in who we *are* (in the spirit of that Kurt Vonnegut poem we heard earlier), rather than always striving for what we don't have, is not only good for our souls, but is also good for the world – which can hardly stand or support more millions and billions of human beings caught by the infectious and insatiable desire for always more, always more.

One further reflection. One of the great virtues of Ecclesiastes is that the writer struggles with and in the end accepts the whole of life (the “full catastrophe” as Zorba put it), the complexities and even the contradictions of life, and still concludes by affirming the virtue of living wholeheartedly – not frantically, not grasping, but wholeheartedly in this moment, with these people, with this work that is before us, with this joy or sorrow that is before us.

This past Wednesday afternoon, as our class sat in the Parish House parlor discussing all of this, the ancient lesson was playing out once again, just within earshot. There was a reception taking place in the Fellowship Hall following a memorial service. (A family from the Linden Ponds community had rented the Meeting House and Parish House for the occasion.) We could smell the aroma of a fine lunch, we could hear the quiet hum of conversation. Then, as our hour of conversation wound down, someone started playing the piano. Then we heard voices singing old songs – likely they were songs beloved by the person who was being remembered.

So there, even – perhaps especially in a sense – in the “house of mourning” was a measure of joy and pleasure – shared fellowship, food, song. It *is* how we human beings live, and this is as it ought to be – never denying the suffering that is real, the losses that are real, the transience that is sometimes all too poignant; yet at the same time and in a sense because of that suffering, those losses, that reality of life's transience, eating our bread in gladness, enjoying and appreciating one another's presence, doing our work with all our might.

Today we could do worse than to end with a teacher closer to our own times than Ecclesiastes. This passage from Thoreau's *Walden*, a passage which may be familiar to many of you, was shared by one of our class members following our session on Ecclesiastes, and it captures the concluding message pretty well:

I am grateful for what I have. My thanksgiving is perpetual. It is surprising how contented one can be with nothing definite... only a sense of existence. My breath is sweet to me. O how I laugh when I think of my vague indefinite riches. No run on my bank can ever drain it, for my wealth is not possession, but enjoyment.

In this spirit, then, I invite you to enjoy. To find enjoyment in whatever you are doing, in the midst of work or play, in the midst of easy times or hard. I invite us all to enjoy, knowing that our wealth is not possession, but enjoyment itself, knowing that the Creation is *meant* to be enjoyed.

So it is. So may it be.