

“The Wisdom of Spit and Vinegar”

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St. Paul’s UCC Church

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Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 3:1-17

The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do 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 filled with hearing.

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us. The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand

in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work.

Andy Rooney was an American radio and television writer, best known for his weekly broadcast "A Few Minutes with Andy Rooney," which was part of the CBS News program *60 Minutes*. In Rooney's "end-of-show" segment, he typically offered satire on run-of-the-mill, everyday issues, like the cost of groceries, or annoying relatives, or things that just don't make sense. "Computers make it easier to do a lot of things, but most of the things they make it easier to do don't need to be done,"¹ he once said. Or, speaking about aging: "I didn't get old on purpose, it just happened. If you're lucky, it could happen to you."²

Andy Rooney: wise and witty in his way, but full of spit and vinegar.

And... I think that Andy Rooney – or, someone like him – just might have written the book of Ecclesiastes.

Welcome back, church, to our three-week series on the Wisdom Literature of the Bible. Last week, we looked at the book of Proverbs; today, we are reading from the book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is often called "skeptical" or "dissenting" Wisdom;³ I call it "spit and vinegar" Wisdom! The writer of the book is a Teacher – *Qoheleth* is the word in Hebrew – and in 12 chapters, the Teacher addresses his students: giving advice, imparting wisdom, educating his students in what he knows.

But, who exactly is this Teacher? Who is Qoheleth?

He's clearly an elder, someone who is wise, some sort of sage. He's most certainly a curmudgeon, someone who's lived to a ripe old age, and has grown weary with the up's and down's of life. This Teacher has apparently had some success in life (part of Ecclesiastes 2 reads, for example, "I made great works; I built houses and

¹ See: <http://funnycomedianquotes.com/funny-andy-rooney-jokes-and-quotes.html>.

² *Ibid.*

³ See: https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2510.

planted vineyards for myself⁴), but, as he looks back over his years, the Teacher now finds himself wondering if all that success was really *worth* it, in the end.

One refrain we hear all throughout the book of Ecclesiastes is the theme of vanity. In fact, it's such an important theme that it's mentioned no less than 25 times in the whole book! Ecclesiastes even opens with it: "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity."⁵ Though it's usually translated "vanity," the Hebrew word, *hevel*, is probably better understood as something like "absurdity, meaninglessness, vapor, emptiness, or uselessness." The more literal meaning in Hebrew has to do with breath or breeze or mist. The Teacher often uses the term as a metaphor, coupled with something like "striving after the wind," thus demonstrating to his readers the transience, futility, and irrationality of life.

...Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever looked at what you have done with your life, looked at all your accomplishments, your successes and your failures, and wondered: What was the *point* of all that?

I would bet that a lot of you have felt that way at some juncture in your life. Maybe it was after you graduated from school, and you wondered what the purpose of all that education was... how was it even relevant to the real world? Maybe it was at the end of a marriage, as you wearily picked up the pieces and asked yourself a million times why you made the choices you did, all the while wondering if you could ever love, or be loved, again. Maybe this feeling of futility came during something like a mid-life crisis, when you were supposed to be at the so-called "prime of your life," but all you could do was look around and scratch your head as to how you had *ever* gotten so far on this road; and all you felt was despair. Or maybe it was when you were older, and wiser in some ways, but still disappointed in the trajectory your life had taken: disappointed in the letdowns, the heart-breaks, the emptiness you were left holding.

This feeling that all is vanity – that everything is pointless, or absurd, or meaningless – this feeling can occur in any of us, at any time. And I would guess that each one of us has felt something like it at some point in our lives.

It seems to me that when we are faced with this feeling of meaninglessness, we tend to react in one of two ways: we either say, "The heck with it!" and we live sort of hedonistically – indulging ourselves, gratifying our every pleasure, doing whatever feels good in the moment. Or, on the other extreme, we live more ascetically – denying ourselves, going through life starkly, dispassionately, guiltily, and maybe even unfeelingly. For a lot of us, of course, we do *both* of these things: swinging from one

⁴Ecc. 2:4 (NRSV).

⁵Ecc. 1:2 (NRSV).

extreme to the next, from pleasure to self-denial, from indulgence to grimness, like a very confused monkey in a tree.

But I believe that there is a third option. And I believe that the Teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes, despite all his spit and vinegar, wants to lead us to it.

The knowledge that life can be fleeting, pointless, or vain doesn't have to lead us to seek "all pleasure all the time," nor does it need to lead us to stark self-denial. Instead, what if our questions about the meaning (or meaninglessness) of life led us to a kind of...humility? A kind of awe for the God who made us, and gave us this life, even if we don't always understand what it's all about?

With all this talk about vanity, absurdity and pointlessness, scholars over the years have offered a lot of conflicting accounts of the overall message of Ecclesiastes. Some view the book as a portrayal of life without God; some call the Teacher a skeptic who is beyond the realm of hope; many people even interpret the book as being at odds with most expressions of Judaism and Christianity.

But I would offer an alternative view.

In the face of all this meaninglessness and vanity – which the curmudgeonly Teacher is very real about – I still see him repeatedly urging us humans to embrace life as a gift from God. Yes, it's true: Ecclesiastes tends to focus on the limits, contradictions, and paradoxes of life (which is probably why this book has kind of a bad rap); but I believe that the tensions and contradictions of Ecclesiastes are precisely the point. The Teacher is an utter realist; yet the Teacher *will not let go of God*.⁶

But don't take *my* word for it. The Teacher writes in chapter 3: "I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before [God]."⁷

Life may be vanity, but we can still hold on to God. Life may be vanity, but through it all, but God will never let go of us.

Thanks be to God.

⁶I owe this insight to Meeks et al, *HarperCollins Study Bible* (HarperCollins Publishing, San Francisco, 1989), p. 987.
⁷Ecc. 3:14 (NRSV).