

Sunday February 21st, 2021

Ecclesiastes 8
Series: "What If?"
Sermon: "It's Just Not Fair!"

There is a story about a local minister who went to the barber shop and got a haircut. When the trim was complete, he asked the barber, "How much do I owe you?" The barber replied, "Not a thing Pastor. I consider this part of my serving the Lord." The next morning the barber arrived to find a nice bundle of devotional books and a thank you note from the pastor. That same day a police officer came in to get his haircut.

When the trim was finished, the officer asked, "How much do I owe you?" The barber replied, "It's on the house. It's my way of giving back to the community." The next morning there was at the barber shop door a nice thank you note from the officer and a dozen donuts waiting. That same day the local MP came in for a haircut. When the trim was finished, the MP asked how much his haircut cost.

The barber replied that there was no charge, as this was his way of giving back to his country. The next morning at the barber's door there were 15 MPs waiting for their haircut. Politics is a funny business isn't it. I often wonder why anyone would want to be a politician. The disdain the general population has for politicians of all stripes is obvious. The hours are terrible, and you have to be constantly glad-handing everyone to try and get reelected.

I am however, extremely grateful that I do not live south of the border during recent events. As an outside observer, I am absolutely stunned by the outrageous things being said and done by the supporters of the former president. Most recently, accusations of election fraud, and armed insurrection have arisen. The whole thing has given a black eye to democracy, and from the country that claims to champion democracy.

One thing is for certain, the dividing lines between left leaning and right leaning voters has never been starker. I think the same scenario plays out here in Canada, although without the same intensity. Every time we have an election, we feel pulled one way or the other. Just as there are men and women in the States who will vote for a particular party, no matter what their candidate says, there are some here in Canada who will vote Liberal, Conservative, or NDP every time.

For the clear majority of the rest of us though, we are torn, trying to navigate the competing visions of our country, but also of the world. I know this is a very simplistic description of this tug of war within us, but generally left leaning or liberal politics sees people as generally good and needing their governments to create institutions and programs to enhance the people's lives. Sometimes this is referred to as "big government".

Pulling the other way, or to the right or conservative direction, is the idea that people are basically flawed, and therefore the institutions that are needed are things like police officers, jails, and even the military. Social programs are usually dismissed, because people should look after themselves. For Christians, this puts us in a terrible place. We face a challenge in trying to discern how to deal with ungodly governments in a largely ungodly society. And please don't for a moment think that both are not ungodly. We do not live in a theocracy.

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Our struggle comes from the fact that as followers of Christ we know that people are made in the image of God, but that image has been marred by sin. The good news is that through Christ, that image can be repaired by our giving our lives over to Jesus. We can be “born again” as John 3 tells us. However, the selfish nature of humanity still is the dominant force in our secular society. How do we who are flawed, even if we believe we are redeemed, interact with our political authorities?

Especially, when these same political forces impact our lives in so many ways. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes, wrote three thousand years ago that the only way to deal with rulers and governments is with wisdom. The first thing the Preacher tells us about dealing with rulers is that God works through authority. In the bible, we hear about kings who wield political authority, and prophets and priests who wield spiritual authority.

We also see Jesus’ example of submitting himself to his Father’s authority. The bible talks about respecting the authority of rulers, parents, and even employers. How does this call to respect authority grab you? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Respect for authority, is in my mind, at an all-time low. Never before, especially with social media, has authority been questioned as it is today. Entire groups now exist whose stated purpose is to question authority.

Whatever veracity in their claims, groups exist because of a distrust in authority. It is a bit ironic that today, I am a Baptist pastor, in a protestant denomination, that arose originally out of the reformation, which also was a protest against the abuse of authority in the Anglican church. Baptists came out of the Puritan movement in England. Baptists historically distrust hierarchical church structure, and do not normally tolerate directives from the denomination.

I guess, as a Baptist, I am a bit of a rebel. The problem is, we need authority. Without it, chaos reigns. We need law, order, and good government. We need authority in institutions, including, yes Baptists, the church. We certainly need authority in the home, to help us raise our children. I remind us again that the authority often wielded in our society is God given. If we want to honour God we must honour his use of authority in our lives.

That doesn’t mean we do not speak out against injustice, that our authorities perpetrate or allow. That doesn’t mean we can ignore the importance of our responsibility to hold our authorities accountable at the ballot box, or with some form of oversight. The caution offered is that we need to pick our battles carefully and prayerfully. Not every cause is just, or of equal importance. Not everything demands us to “fall on our swords”.

We cannot neglect our work on improving our internal spiritual lives because we are chasing too many rabbits in the secular world. In respecting authority, it is okay to participate in protest, but not in ungodly plots. If an unruly mob is going out to vandalize and destroy property, it is not the place for us to be no matter how just the cause. This is of particular concern for young people who often feel tempted to act on their frustration, without restraint.

As Christ’s followers, it is important for us to understand that God has given us time and processes to deal with serious issues in the right way, at the right time, and for the right reason.

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In the home, the church, the government, and in legal circles; there are ways for us to address our concerns. If you are being mistreated by your employer there are lawyers, tribunals, and laws to deal with it.

If you have a problem with your government, there are mechanisms to try and resolve it. Are these processes perfect? Of course not, but that does not excuse us from pursuing the ways God gave us to help us. The greatest challenge and frustration we face in dealing with any authority may be lack of good communication. Such was the case of a pastor who was meeting with his board of trustees and was requesting the approval of a purchase of a new chandelier for the sanctuary.

The next month when the minutes were read out there was no mention of the pastor's request, so he mentioned it again. The next month the pastor waited for a report on any action the trustees had taken on procuring a new chandelier, and again there was no mention of it in the minutes. So, after the meeting the minister approached the chairman and asked for an explanation for the omission of any report on the chandelier.

"Well, pastor, it was this way," explained the chairman. "First of all, the secretary of the trustees didn't know how to spell chandelier, and it would have embarrassed him if we insisted it be included in the minutes. Second, if we got one of those things, we don't believe there is anyone in the church who knows how to play it. And third, we feel that the thing we really need is better lighting in the sanctuary." (1002 Humorous Illustrations, p. 66)

Just because we can shout louder than everyone else, doesn't mean we are being clear, or understood, or even right. We must show trust in God in choosing the right issue, at the right time, if we want to bring about change; especially godly change. Too much of how we treat authority these days is life destroying. It is always easier to destroy something, than build up something. Something Mr. Trump needs to learn.

We also must recognize in dealing with authority that there are times when only God can fix a situation. This is what the Preacher is talking about in verses 7-9. We do not know what the future holds, or when we will die, or what nature will do. The fact is that there are things in this world that no human can control or alter. If you do not believe me, just explain to me how you can do anything about a hurricane.

There is a very interesting passage at the end of the book of Job that speaks to the fact there are things out of our control. (Job 41:1-11)

"Can you catch a crocodile with a hook or put a noose around its jaw? Can you tie it with a rope through the nose or pierce its jaw with a spike? Will it beg you for mercy or implore you for pity? Will it agree to work for you? Can you make it be your slave for life? Can you make it a pet like a bird, or give it your little girls to play with? Will merchants try and buy it? Will they sell it in their shops? Will its hide be hurt by darts, or its head by a harpoon? If you lay a hand on it, you will never forget the battle that follows, and you will never try it again!

No, it is useless to try and capture it. The hunter who attempts it will be thrown down. And since no one dares to disturb the crocodile, who would dare stand up to me? Who will confront me and remain safe? Everything under heaven is mine."

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God alone has authority over everything and everyone. In this life, people use their power to hurt and harm one another. This is true of anyone in authority. But one day, every throne but one will be gone. Sitting on that throne will be the King of kings and Lord of lords -Jesus Christ!

He will judge the living and the dead. That includes those who have used or abused their power and authority. That is why verse 10-14 commend us to keep our heads, to do our part in seeking justice, and living a righteous life. The world is full of injustice, but rarely do we examine our connection to it. We are not very inclined to get passionate about injustice that personally benefits us or someone we love.

Then something happens that shatters our sense of fairness, because it impinges on us. The more we examine the bigger picture of what is going on, the more inclined we are to see the world as the Preacher does. Wicked people get elaborate funerals. Evil doers get praised in houses of worship. Criminals get away with crimes. Sometimes we observe that some of the vilest people live the longest lives.

Then to rub salt to our wounds, good people get vilified. The Preacher says it is all “Meaningless!” In a twisted piece of logic, people looking at this unfairness may be inclined to live an evil life and reap the benefits, and many do. People would not commit crimes if they did not believe it benefitted them somehow. The Preacher tells us that the key to keeping our head on straight in all this, is to fear God.

That ultimately God will sort it all out. There will be a day of reckoning. Jesus, as the King of kings will dispense justice. A wise person knows who ultimately oversees all things, and ultimately who we are answerable to. It may look like the evil, unjust, person; is living a great life, free of cares and worry, but it is an illusion. One day the truth will be revealed to them and us, and the “chickens will come home to roost”.

In the meantime, the Preacher encourages us to not languish in despair over the injustice we see, but to enjoy the good things of life provided by God’s hands. We should be concerned about injustice, but not obsessed with it. Some of us can become so dour that we are of little use to the Kingdom of God.

In his book *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton talks about the “madman”. He defines the madman as someone who is so obsessed with one thing, that they lose sight of other things. They relate everything to that one thing, which eventually leads them to become conspiracy theorists, pulling things together into patterns that do not exist except in their minds. Chesterton writes, “If the madman could for an instant become careless, he would become sane.”

But sadly, this does not happen because “He is not hampered by a sense of humour... The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.” There is a great deal of madness in this world parading around as truth. Making claims, that they see behind the curtain despite all proof to the contrary. Sometimes the claims seem so ridiculous that one wonders how anyone could believe them, but millions do.

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If recent events south of the border have taught us anything, it is that wisdom is in short supply. But this has not stopped people from claiming that they have it. This despite the Preacher telling us that even the wisest people do not know everything. As Charles Swindoll wrote, “What comes from the Lord because it is impossible to manufacture it? Wisdom.

What comes from humans because it is impossible for the Lord to experience it? Worry. What is it that brings wisdom and dispels worry? Worship. (Takes of a Tardy Oxcart, p. 613) This is the answer to our anxiety, and our feelings of inadequacy in the face of challenges. Challenges in dealing with authority and all manner of other situations that seem beyond us. We take it to the Lord. We lay our burdens down at his feet.

And we leave those burdens where we dropped them, and walk away restored, refreshed and a little wiser.