

Sunday February 28th, 2021

Ecclesiastes 9
Series: What If?
Sermon: "The Great Equalizer"

I am fairly certain; I have shared my significant moment of childhood trauma with you or least some of you before. It occurred in my kindergarten days, under the tutelage of one Miss Clubine (sp.) my teacher. Miss Clubine, in her vast experience, it was her first year as a teacher, decided to contact my mother, to inform her that I was clearly a child with some sort of mental retardation. Today we would say I was intellectually challenged, or delayed. I know some you will reply, "Well that explains everything". Let's not get nasty!

This news, of course, upset my mother, as you can imagine, and immediately a child psychiatrist was engaged to assess me. After a few sessions, the psychiatrist informed my parents that I was not intellectually challenged, despite what some people might still believe, but rather I was bored. And right he was. Kindergarten bored me. The activities that most kids my age enjoyed, like playing imaginative games such as grocery store or farm, I disliked.

While we engaged in play designed to help us learn and socialize, I wanted to learn my ABCs and 123s. One thing about me that I readily admit, is that I get bored easily. Always have. As a kid, I was the one in the classroom daydreaming about all kinds of things. Creating intricate stories in my mind of grand adventures. I still do it occasionally, and I also find myself imagining myself in the heart of a story I have just read, or seen on television, or in the movies.

Boredom in students is something teachers try to cope with all the time. Boredom in parishioners is what preachers try to cope with all the time. Being bored, drives us to do all kinds of things. Sometimes good things, like creating something, but sometimes destructive things like vandalism. One odd thing that happens in life, is that being overly stimulated, or overly exposed to something actually leads to greater boredom.

According to the Center for Media Education, most children in North America, watch 3-4 hours a day of television, or approximately 28 hours a week. Watching television is the number one after school activity for 6 to 17-year-olds. Each year, children spend 1,500 hours in front of the TV and only 900 hours in the classroom. More recently in the pandemic, I am sure. By age 70, most of us have watched about ten years of television. By age 21, the average viewer has seen one million commercials.

Teenagers will see 100,000 alcohol commercials before reaching the legal drinking age. Children who watch four or more hours of TV a day, spend less time on school work, have poorer reading skills, play and socialize poorly with their peers, and have fewer hobbies. We are so overstimulated as a society through: music, television, movies, the internet, and video games: that everyone is hyped up, tense, and thus; easily bored.

Rediscovering our imaginations, and creativity, plays a big part in our personal sense of happiness. One of the big lessons the Preacher in Ecclesiastes is trying to teach is that there is a difference between living and simply existing. And part of our journey in discovering that difference, is recognizing which philosophy of life we follow.

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God's philosophy, or way of life, has many facets, but today's passage focuses on three specific ones. We might refer to them as three things to remember to find contentment.

The first thing we need to remember is in verses 7-10, and that is that we can control some things in our lives. Namely, the big thing we can control is how we approach life, or our attitude. We can live as if we are victimized by life, and can therefore live passively. In other words, we can simply give up trying to see any good in this life. The Preacher makes some suggestions to recover our zest for life. In verse 7 he commends us to enjoy the simple pleasures of life.

We should cultivate fun, joy, and humour. Too often in life, we chase after the big things, thinking that our lives will be happy and well-adjusted if we simply get them. Many young adults, and honestly, I think I was in this camp, think that if they just get a career, get married, have a family, buy a house, then everything will be okay. Some of us who have been around the block a few times, simply giggle at such naivety.

Achieving these things is no guarantee of happiness. The Preacher tells us to intentionally find pleasure in the simple things of life. Things like good food, and drink. We could add to that list by saying we should "stop and smell the roses". Happy people are often the ones who find pleasure in the routine, and mundane activities of life. How long has it been since you have taken a moment to enjoy the world around you?

The Preacher suggests in verse 8 that we should make every day a party. The famous Chef Emeril has a cookbook by that title, but the Preacher suggested it first. Even a regular day can become special if we dress up, put on our perfume, style our hair, and make it an occasion. The late Erma Bombeck was a great one at dolling out nuggets of perspective on the simplest of things. She wrote a list of things she would have done differently if she had her life to live over again. The list was written just after she learned she had cancer.

*I would have gone to bed when I was sick instead of pretending the earth would go into a holding pattern if I weren't there for the day.
I would have burned the pink candle sculpted like a rose before it melted in storage.
I would have talked less and listened more.
I would have invited friends over to dinner even if the carpet was stained or the sofa faded.*

*I would have eaten the popcorn in the "good" living room and worried less about the dirt when someone wanted to light a fire in the fireplace.
I would have taken the time to listen to my grandfather ramble on about his youth.
I would never have insisted the car windows be rolled up on a summer day because my hair had just been teased and sprayed.*

*I would have sat on the lawn with my children and worried less about grass stains.
I would have cried less and laughed less while watching television and more while watching life.
I would never have bought anything just because it was practical, wouldn't show soil, or was guaranteed to last a lifetime.*

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Instead of wishing away nine months of pregnancy, I'd have cherished every moment and realized that the wonderment growing inside me was the only chance in life to assist God in a miracle. When my kids kissed me impetuously, I would never have said, "Later. Now get washed up for dinner." There would have been more "I love you's". More "I'm sorry's". But mostly, given another shot at life, I would seize every minute, look at it and really see it, live it and never give it back.

How do we literally live life "always clothed in our best"? The Hebrew here means literally "Clothed in white", because white was the colour of festivity. Especially when we remember the words in Ecclesiastes 7:2 "It is better to go to a house of mourning than a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure. It is better to heed a wise man's rebuke than listen to the song of fools."

How do we reconcile these two pictures? Well, first, Ecclesiastes is an example of wisdom literature, and wisdom literature uses a literary tactic of placing two contrasting ideas together. Jesus used this technique brilliantly in his sermon on the mound. "Blessed are they that mourn". Also, translated "Happy are they that mourn". The answer to this puzzle is covered back in chapter three. "There is a time to weep and a time laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance".

The Preacher's point is simply this. God wants us to experience the full spectrum of what it means to be human; we should not avoid the house of mourning, and we should try to make other days, days of celebration. What we should never do, is go through life oblivious to what is going on, or allow our attitudes to be influenced solely by which way the winds of life are blowing. We can control, whether, or not, we see life as full of wonder and enthusiasm.

Another thing you can control is whether, or not, your marriage is a source of joy for you. (vs.9) All of us, who have been married for a while, know that marriage often begins with a few months of excitement, only to morph into something more predictable. John Paul Getty was one of the richest men who ever lived. You would never expect someone like him to ever be envious of anyone, but Getty was envious of a group of people.

Getty once remarked that that he was envious of those who could make a marriage work. Getty himself was married and divorced five time. Maybe I am stating the obvious, but getting married, is not the same as enjoying life with your spouse. Healthy marriages should allow flexibility for each individual, to explore their own interests and hobbies. Yes, it is very good to share some interests, but even if we are married, we are still individuals.

So, it is okay if Laura loves to watch Survivor or curling, especially now we can PVR it. Good marriages take effort. It takes effort to not just get through life together, but to enjoy life together. This is especially critical as a couple ages and the children are gone, and then as retirement approaches. How do you enjoy life together?

Finally, the preacher says that one thing you can control is how you do things in life. So, he suggests that we do things with enthusiasm.

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We should put our hearts into whatever we are doing. The next thing we must remember in life is that whatever control we do have is limited. None of us likes the unpredictability of life, but controlling people are truly miserable. As we have examined in length in this series, life is not fair. There is an old saying “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans”. There are always, in our lives, wild cards.

There is always a monkey wrench just waiting to be tossed into our best laid plans. Notice the illustration the Preacher uses here; it is a very useful one. “The fastest runner does not always win the race, and the strongest warrior every battle.” In sports, we all know stories of underdogs beating the favourites. At a horse race, they give odds as to who is the favourite to win. Most often it is correct, but every once in a while, the longshot wins.

Just ask the Philistines what the odds were that little David and his sling could bring down mighty Goliath. We all know this to be true, and we try to mitigate the risks in life with things like insurance, and savings, and wills etc. But the very best preparation we can make is to consciously remember that our control is limited, and we desperately need God. When tough times come, we always have a choice. Go through them with God, or without him.

Finally, the Preacher wants us to remember in verses 13-18 that substance is always more important than image. There is an historical example of how wisdom saved an entire city. Alexander the Great marched his troops to the city of Lampsacus. As they approached the city, Alexander’s old tutor Anaximenes came out to meet him. Alexander knew that his old teacher would try and talk him out of destroying the city, and so he vowed before his troops that he would not grant anything to Anaximenes that he asked for.

Anaximenes thought for a moment and then said, “I desire that you will destroy this city.” Alexander had made an oath, and he kept his word, and the city was spared. Here was a wise king that no one remembers, but he was a man of substance; confronting a king who was all about image, glory, and wealth. This battle between substance and image is still raging on all around us. The current US election is a prime example of this.

In the Toronto Star on Oct. 26 there was an article that detailed 37 false things Donald Trump reported as facts in one day; Oct. 25th. And yet millions still intended to vote for him. Image over substance. This election has revealed that feeling something to be true, now supersedes something actually being true.

Churches and ministries are not immune to this trend. Millions worldwide are attracted to churches that have a lot of glitz, Hollywood production, or emotional manipulation. The hard truths of Jesus are down played, or Jesus is portrayed as holding political views that are not at all in line with the biblical portrayal of Jesus. God sees us differently than the world. He sees beneath the façade to what is truly important.

In the bible, King Saul is portrayed as a man who looked like a king. He was tall, handsome, powerful, and a bit egotistical. But what did God say to Samuel. “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him.

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The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man, looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” But David, the youngest son of Jesse, a shepherd boy, was the king after God’s own heart.

Being popular, selling lots of books, going on nationwide tours: does not necessarily mean someone is close to God. Many of those in the bible who were closest to God, led very difficult lives. The prophets, the apostles, and of course Jesus himself. We need to be very cautious in gravitating towards image and away from substance.

As a pastor, one of my responsibilities to keep my focus on the substance of faith. To not get suckered in to playing religion. One of the surest signs of a drift away from substance is our desire to feel something religious, rather than to wrestle with the truth of God. If we would rather feel good about God, rather than squirm in our seats at his convicting truth, than we have come seeking image over substance.

So again, the difference between living and existing comes down to your philosophy of life. We must remember that we can control some things. We must remember that our control is limited and that substance is more important than image. To truly enjoy life as God provided it for us, even in all its ups and down. This is true wisdom.