

Sunday March 14th, 2021

Ecclesiastes 11
"Taking Risks"

A group of men is at the gym club, when a cellphone rang. One of the men answers the phone and says: "Yes?" "Hun, is that you? I can hardly hear you." She speaks louder, so now all the men can hear. "Hello!" "Are you at the gym?" she asks. "Yes!" She continues, "I'm in front of the fur shop and they have this beautiful mink coat. Can I buy it?" "How much is it?" "About five thousand dollars." "Okay, but buy a matching purse that goes with it too my love."

"Well, it also turns out that I stopped by the car dealership today and saw they have a brand-new BMW on sale, it's the last one." "How much is the sale?" "Only sixty thousand dollars!" "Fine, buy it, but you have to get it with all of the accessories, and if it costs a little more, I won't get mad." The woman, realizing all of her requests were being approved, decided to take a risk. "Honey, remember that I told you that my mother wants to come live with us?"

Is it okay if I invite her over for a month, just to try it out, and after a month we can talk about it again.?" "Okay, fine, but don't ask me for anything else okay?" "Yes, yes, I love you so much baby." "Love you too, bye." As soon as he hangs up the man turns to look at the group of other men who are just standing there with their mouths hanging open and then he asks: "Does anyone know whose cellphone this is?"

It is very easy to be cavalier with resources that are not our own. Maybe I am too cynical, but I have noticed a trend in political announcements, that have to do with funding projects or helping people out. Quite often, the politicians gather to make the big announcement, and say something like, "We are pleased to be able to fund this project". Then they announce a big price tag. The thing that gets me, is that every politician speaks as if the money comes out of their own pocket.

It doesn't. It actually comes out of our collective pocket. They are spending money that really isn't theirs. Therefore, it is relatively easy for the government to toss money around, when it cost you nothing personally. For the rest of us, we are much more careful in opening our purses. Not always; but most of the time, and especially when it comes to a big-ticket item, we count the cost. We should ask, "Can we actually afford this purchase?"

Not everyone is adept at doing due diligence when it comes to personal finances. This lack of diligence has led to a very unethical business model in our culture called, "pay day loan" companies. They advertise quick and easy loans, to help us get by until pay day. What you never see in the adds, is the outrages interest and fees you have to pay just to get a few hundred dollars. And once you use their services, it is very hard to break free, as you have to keep borrowing to pay the interest, and principle back. It used to be called usury or loan sharking.

So, we know we have to be careful. It is therefore very interesting that the preacher in Ecclesiastes 11, lays out before us a different approach. Yes, it is prudent to be careful, but it is also wise to take risks. He is telling us that if we are always waiting for the right moment to use our resources, then the right moment may never come. Sometimes, to achieve something, you have to act on faith, and that can be very frightening. I do, however, wonder if there is within us a natural need to, every once in a while, step out of our comfort zone.

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This is maybe why scams work. Ironically, while I was preparing this very message, our home phone rang twice, in about an hour, with a pre-recorded message that my Visa card had been compromised. Also, in the days preceding I have had duct cleaning calls, a scam about Revenue Canada, and someone claiming my computer was compromised. The only reason I still get calls, is that the scammers only need to catch a few unsuspecting folks to make it worthwhile.

Those who try to trick us out of our money and personal information, know that we are generally trusting individuals. If they make the cause or issue, plausible enough, you might just hook a fish. However, the more we hear about scams, the more we are cautious. But being cautious can have a negative consequence, as it can paralyze us into inaction. This is what the preacher in today's text is trying to address.

At first read, the words the preacher uses in this chapter, seem odd at first, but make good sense when we see it in terms of risk and reward. He talks about casting bread upon the water and most of us have heard this verse used to express the need to try something out. Let go a "trial balloon" we like to say. There are a couple of ways to apply this verse. One seems obvious at first, and that is that you never make a profit unless you invest. Taken literally, the verse seems odd, because bread on the water only gets soggy and inedible.

However, in the preacher's day, this reference had to do with investments and trade. The bread in this case, refers to seeds that are sown in order to gain more. Harvests were literally sent out on the water by merchant ships, only to come back many days later with the proceeds of the trade. In farming, if you do not cast your seed, you will not have a harvest. You have to take the risk, to gain the reward.

Set aside your resources in 7 or 8 ways, he says; to try and be prepared, because you never know what is going to happen, but never stop investing. If you wait for the ideal conditions to sow seeds, like no wind or no rain, you may never get a chance. When I was farming, many folks used to talk about "making hay while it is haying weather." In other words, if you want hay, you must cut and bale when the weather is right, and forgo other activities.

"Strike while the iron is hot", is another idiom we have. Metal can only be shaped when it is hot out of the forge. The preacher is telling us to not miss our windows of opportunity, because you never know. A tree lays where it falls, the wind blows as it wills. There is nothing you can do about these things, so do not obsess about them. Wisdom is to know what you can change and what you cannot.

Do you all know the Serenity Prayer? The **Serenity Prayer** is a prayer written by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971). It is commonly quoted as: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." Niebuhr's prayer originally asked for courage first, and specifically for changing things that must be changed, not things that simply can be changed:

Father, give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other.

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The Serenity Prayer is a very good addition to examining the book of Ecclesiastes. In the vanity of life, what we all want is serenity. To be at peace with all the meaninglessness we observe around us. The serenity prayer has been used by AA groups since 1942, but how many of you know the whole prayer.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.

Now I mentioned that there are two ways of looking at the reference to casting your bread upon the water. Ancient Hebrew writers used to refer to the population as the water. Therefore, the reference can also mean that it is wise for us to be generous with what we have. In putting our means in seven or eight different places, we should make sure that one of those places is to be generous to those who have little or none at all.

I would appear the preacher's point here is that you also receive a return when you invest in others less fortunate. I am not suggesting that if we give money to someone or an important cause we will receive back more, but maybe we receive something back that is more important and more precious than simple money.

I found a series of heartwarming stories that the Reader's Digest collected, that speak to the rewards of casting your bread on the waters, or acting with kindness and generosity. *Leslie Wagner, from Peel Arkansas* tells of her experience of such a reward, for both the giver and the receiver of a special gift. She writes:

“When the supermarket clerk tallied up my groceries, I was \$12 over what I had on me. I began to remove items from the bags, when another shopper handed me a \$20 bill. ‘Please don't put yourself out,’ I told him. ‘Let me tell you a story,’ he said. ‘My mother is in the hospital with cancer. I visit her every day and bring her flowers. I went this morning, and she got mad at me for spending my money on more flowers. She demanded that I do something else with that money. So, here, please accept this. It is my mother's flowers.’”

That young man saw the power of his gift, but many times we just do not know the good we do. If you cast your bread on the water, you may never know what shall return to you. In *The Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus said, “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:3–4).

Jesus' commands us to give in such a way that one hand is unaware of what the other hand is doing is obviously not to be taken literally. The context suggests that the injunction to “not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” refers to giving alms or donations in secret and stands in contrast with drawing attention to our giving. Those who give in order to receive accolades from others, have already received their reward (Matthew 6:2).

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God will reward those who give in secret.

Tim Sanders is a leadership coach and former Chief Solutions Officer at Yahoo!. Sanders advises all of his employees to reach out to their workers and subordinates to show their appreciation for their work. He often tells the story of how he did just that, speaking to his staff individually, giving them positive feedback on their performance, and telling them that he appreciated their efforts. Sanders recalls telling one specific man how glad he was that the man come into his life.

After Sanders visited with his team, he was shocked when that man turned up a few days later and gave him an expensive gift, an X-Box console. As it turns out, this employee had purchased the X-Box by pawning a revolver that he had intended to use to kill himself. After hearing the small words of praise from his boss, the man decided to keep living and seek help for his depression. Just a few kind words were all it took to help him out of his suicidal funk. "Sometimes people just need people," Sanders said.

This is something the pandemic has shown all of us. Through out our little series on Ecclesiastes there is the underlying theme that much of our contentment arises out of our view of life. If we can see the positive in even the darkest moments, we cultivate a grateful heart and find we are more at peace with our lives. Perspective is everything and the sooner we accept this the sooner we will know serenity.

I found it interesting that the preacher mentions that young men (I would include women here as well) should enjoy life while you can. It leads me to think our preacher is, as he writes this, an older man, perhaps in his final years and wanting to pass on the lessons he learned. In many seniors I have met, there is evidence of a "coming to terms" with the facts about aging and a humour arising out of the serenity of acceptance of one's time of life.

My dear friend Stan Treeby in Toronto, was such a man. He was at peace with getting older. He lived into his nineties and loved life until the end. He was always passing on little humorous nuggets that expressed his peace with his age and circumstance. He said for example that at his age he "never bought green bananas". He also told me one time that he loved being old. When I asked why, he said, "no peer pressure".

However, I also have known people much younger than Stanley, who find life a drudgery. Yes, some of it is related to chronic health issues, but often it is a matter of one's attitude. I hope some of Stan's positive attitude to aging will have rubbed off on me, as I tack on the years. The final thing the preacher talks about in this chapter is one of the hardest lessons in life to learn, at least for me.

The preacher talks about banishing anxiety from your mind and pain from your body. It reads at first as if the preacher thinks we can just will our way to being pain free and anxiety free. However, translation in this verse is everything. The words "banish anxiety" is better rendered "therefore, remove sorrow" — Sensual and disorderly lusts, which he elegantly calls sorrow, cause harm to intimacy, that although such practices at present gratify people's senses.

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Yet they will shortly bring them to intolerable sorrows. “Put away pain” is better rendered, “And put away evil from your flesh — All evil desires, though they may seem good to us, especially in our youth. The reality is that it is vanity. The time of youth is vanishing and transitory, and old age and death will speedily come, against which every wise man will take care to lay in solid provisions and comforts.

It is therefore reckless, to always keep in mind when we are young that it is only a temporary state. The energy, the desires of youth will fade, in the inevitable aging process. Prepare yourself, the preacher is saying. Prepare for the time when youth is no longer an advantage. T reminds me of the worry many parents have over their teenage children that they can do foolish things because they believe they are invincible. News flash; they are not invincible.

And those of us who are older, know this to be true. Chapter 11 seems to be summed up nicely by saying that we need to understand that life moves through youth to old age and we need to be prepared for this. Further more, we need to invest ourselves, and our resources, in making the world and the lives of others better. This seems to have been the legacy of one Walter Gretzky who passed recently.

He was never satisfied until he helped everyone he could, and opened his heart and his home to everyone. No wonder Wayne said of his dad, “He was the Great One”. You and I are called to be great in the service of God, are you up to the challenge.