

Eat, Drink, & Be Merry

Ecclesiastes 9:7-10

Rev. Dan Schumacher

There is a now decade long, ongoing debate between Christen and me that centers around my outlook on life. I contend that I am a *realist*. But every time I say that, Christen counters with: “No, Dan. *I* am a realist. *You* are a pessimist.”

That debate surfaced again few summers ago. It had been an abnormally hot spring and early summer, and Christen and I had gotten into the habit of taking our two dogs over to Stratton Open Space for an early morning hike and swim in the reservoir.

The hike from the parking area up to the reservoir isn't terribly far or terribly difficult, and the open space is beautiful – especially early in the summer. Besides the shrubs and bushes all being leafed out, the hillside was green with native grasses and wild flowers.

On the hike up, Christen – who loves wild flowers – was looking down at the side of the trail, taking in all the blue and purple and red blossoms. After she had pointed at one and named it, she said, “I just love the wild flowers at this time of year. They're so beautiful! And this year, it seems like there are more flowers than usual.”

And, in reply, I said, “Well, enjoy it while you can... As hot as it's been, this whole hillside will be bone dry in a month...”

That's when Christen called me a “Debbie Downer” and pointed out that “enjoying it while she could” was precisely what she was trying to do before I opened my big mouth.

I was just trying to make a realistic observation. But maybe my realism does lean a smidge toward the pessimistic side of things. I think that's why I like the book of Ecclesiastes so much.

Ecclesiastes has traditionally been attributed to Solomon, because he was a man known for his great wisdom. More recent scholarship would tell us that Solomon wasn't the author, but that Ecclesiastes was written by someone somewhat ironically referred to as “Qoholeth.”

Qoholeth is a pen name – like Mark Twain was for Samuel Langhorne Clemens or Dr. Seuss was for Theodor Geisel. And it's somewhat ironic, because Qoholeth means something like “one who gathers an assembly.” But when you read what he wrote, you can't help but get the sense that people sort of walked away from a session with Qoholeth sort of shaking their heads, no longer sure just what to believe.

That's because Qoholeth was a man vexed by death.

In verses two and three of this ninth chapter, he says, “You’re all going to end up dead. Doesn’t matter if you’re righteous or wicked, good or evil, if you worship God or not. It doesn’t matter how carefully you live, you will be just as dead as those who were scoundrels.” And this drives Qohelet a little bit nuts.

In verse four, he says, “A living dog is better than a dead lion,” whatever that means.

In verse five, he says, “Not only are you going to die, but after a little while, we’re going to forget that you were ever alive.”

And then in verse six, he says, “Not only is your body going to die, but everything that made you you – the parts of you that were loving and good and tender, the things you hated... nobody is going to care, because it’s all in the grave with you.”

Now, we would say that this is not the Bible at it’s most inspiring. But we’d have a hard time arguing with it. Not only do we find our physical lives all come to an end, no matter how well they were lived along the way, but before we get to the grave we get plenty of experience with “death-like” opportunities – with the loss of relationships, the loss of dreams, the loss of health, the loss of our youth, the fleeting moments of happiness. Every Camelot, no matter how wonderful it is, comes to an end.

So you might think that with that type of despairing, slightly pessimistic realization that Qohelet’s next words would be, “So your pursuit of truth and love and justice and beauty – it’s all a *fool’s* game.”

But that’s not what he says. The next thing he says is the opening line of our passage this morning: “So go, eat your bread with enjoyment. Drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved of what you do.”

As the rest of the Bible makes clear, this isn’t saying that God approves of all human choices. It’s saying what it says – that God has approved of *enjoyment* and a *merry heart*.

Where do you think that yearning came from? It comes from the God in whose image we are made.

As the creation narrative makes clear, after six days of work, God rested on the seventh to enjoy and call the work good. We tend to think of the Sabbath as moment of rest so that we can get back to work, because *that’s* the goal.

But that’s not the way the creation narrative is written. God engages in all of that work that culminates in *joy* and in calling it good. *That’s* the God in whose image we are made – thus the yearning for joy.

Now, that doesn’t mean that your life will be a constant experience of joy. It doesn’t mean that your participation in our flawed community of faith will be a constant

experience of merriment. It doesn't mean that at the end of a long, hard day, you're going to be saying, "This is good."

Remember, there were those other six metaphorical days of work — and, by the way, a metaphorical day can last a long time. Then comes the discovery of seeing that it is good and the joy that comes in that.

All that Qoholet is trying to say to us is that when you find joy, when your heart is made merry, it's approved by God. It's ok.

And this is an important reminder as we all round the corner to Thanksgiving, because we Christians have such a deep, spiritual tradition of the call to take the hard road, to carry your cross, to suffer with those who suffer. I have plenty of sermons on that, and I plan on writing a whole lot more. But let's remember that you don't have to be miserable to be spiritual.

God has approved of your joy. That's allowed. It's commended. The Catholic priest, Leo Rock said it like this, "God created us — because he thought we'd *enjoy* it" (Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 147).

The work that we have to do — whether that is our actual jobs, our families, our unique circumstances, how we serve others, maybe even living into the unique identity that is ours alone... the work that we have to do, if it is work that God has given us to do, is going to be hard. It's going to be difficult. The challenges that we will have confronting are going to be huge. We're called to make a difference in a very broken world. Don't expect that work to be easy.

But along the way as you live into that call, if there are times of eating your bread with enjoyment and drinking your wine with a merry heart, Qoholet says, "Take it. Take it before you and your work end up in the grave."

Our problem, of course, is that we either look for joy in all the wrong places or we fail to enjoy life at all.

"Whoever said money can't buy happiness isn't spending it right." That was the tagline for a Lexus ad. The irony, of course, is that they hijacked the bumper-sticker line, "Money can't buy happiness," for a commercial for a car so fancy that no one would dream of putting a bumper sticker on it.

And what should make that ad most infuriating is that they're offering the wrong answer to the right question. The right question is: what makes for the good life? And their answer is: a luxury car.

We know that's not true. All you have to do is watch one episode of one those "Real Housewives" shows that Pastor Katie loves so much to know that it's not true. Those

people are *all* driving Lexuses or even higher end luxury cars, and none of them are happy. There isn't enough botox in the world to make those people happy.

But at some level, they are us. Perhaps in exaggerated form, but they are us — who know that the right question is, "What makes for the good life?" but who all think we ought to be able to buy the answer. Just one more gadget, just one more TV, just one more remodel, just one more upgrade, just one more milkshake, just one more beer... and I'll finally be happy.

We look for joy in all the wrong places. Or, we fail to enjoy life at all.

The Lutheran pastor, Judy Kincaid, tells the story of her friend Kevin, whose mother-in-law was a kind and generous person... most of the time. But she could be a little judgmental, too. She had zero patience for people who she saw as having bad manners.

When Kevin and his wife were moving his mother-in-law out of her home and into an assisted living facility, they found a strange envelope. It was a plain, white envelope, but on the front, she had written a single word. It said, "Deadbeats," and it was underlined twice.

When Kevin and his wife had gotten married decades ago, each guest who had rsvp'd had a place card at a table with their name on it, so they'd know where to sit. When the reception was over, Kevin's mother-in-law had gathered up the place cards of the people who never showed up for the reception and put them in that envelope, sealed it, and marked them as "deadbeats."

She was at her daughter's wedding — should have been eating bread with enjoyment, drinking wine with a merry heart, celebrating the beauty of love and commitment — and instead she was collecting the names of "deadbeats" ("*Lepers and Deadbeats*," *A Sermon for Every Sunday*, October 9, 2022).

It's almost like going for a walk in a field of wild flowers, and instead of enjoying them, pointing out how they'll soon all be dead...

Too often we do the same thing in our own lives, don't we? We see nothing good, only the bad, and so we tuck that part of our life into the envelope, seal it, and mark it "deadbeat."

What a shame that we so often forget that God created us, because he thought we'd *enjoy* it.

The Presbyterian pastor Craig Barnes tells this story:

"A number of years when I was serving a congregation as its pastor, I did a wedding for a couple named, Mike and Sue. We had worked through the premarital counseling, I thought. And they'd come back in for what I was planing on just being a time to work

on the wedding itself. So we were sitting at a table this time and we had copies of the wedding ceremony in front of us and red pens and we were going to make all of the adjustments and edits.

And just as I started to launch into this, Mike says, 'Wait a minute. I just have to say that I'm really, *really* frightened.' So he now has Sue's attention.

Seeing tears well up in her eyes, he says, "Oh, no-no, sweetheart! You don't understand. I'm not afraid of marrying you. I'm afraid of *losing* you."

Barnes says, "He looked at me and he said, 'You know, my mother died when I was a teenager. I barely survived that. I love this woman even more. If anything ever happens to her, it will be the end of me.' And then he had these big, puppy-dog eyes staring at me, and I knew what he wanted me to say. He wanted me to say, 'Oh, Mike. You're young. You've got so many years ahead of you. You shouldn't worry about this at all.'

But I couldn't say that, because I've buried too many young people. So instead, I said, 'Well, Mike, in my experience one-hundred percent of marriages come to an end, and you're not going to beat those odds. Now let's get back to work.'"

He says, "This was my shot at the wisdom of Ecclesiastes."

"Mike said, 'What?!'

I said, 'Well, either tragically through divorce or tragically through death, all marriages come to an end. *All* of them. Yours will, too.'

Still not satisfied, I said, 'Well, let's project a little then. Let's say that you have the finest marriage that this earth has ever seen, and every day you grow more deeply in love with this woman. And let's give you a lot of years. How many you want? 60? 65? Let's make it a 65-year marriage of intense passion.' Just going with his dream, here.

'Let's say you have that marriage. At the end, one of you is still going to have to lay the other one in a grave, and that's going to tear your heart out, because your love will have been so intense over the years, your souls so intertwined with each other, that you're not going to know who you are without this person. You don't know if you can survive. And — by the way — *that's the best possible scenario!* Right? Why do you want to go through that? I say give her up today. Let's get the grief over with right now.

'Don't cling to her, because it's only a prescription for anxiety. Open your hands to hold this love... this marriage. Then each day when you wake up and she's there beside you, you can be like, "You are still here?! I get another day of this gift from heaven, because you are still living upright under it"' ("Choosing Joy," *Princeton Theological Seminary Chapel*, September 7, 2018).

The world needs so much from you. It needs your passion. It needs your hard work. It even needs your anger. But it's dying for you *joy*.

If you want to use your life to make a difference, look for the joy.

Look for the joy that is always yours. And the secret to finding it, is not to cling to what you have. You don't have to, because God is clinging to you.

Don't cling to your blessings or your hurts. Don't cling to your dreams. Don't cling to your certainty – because it will only make you “dead right.”

Instead, open your hands to the realization that the God above you is also at work within you – in ways far more mysterious than you understand today.

Worship and discover that God is at work within you day after day. Then take the daily bread – the manna from heaven. Find the joy that is there, so you can eat your bread with enjoyment, drink your wine with a merry heart, and be renewed for the work that waits tomorrow.

Happy thanksgiving, First Baptist family!

Amen.