

Sister Death: Living Well
Ecclesiastes 6:1-12; 8:14-15

Ecclesiastes 6:1-12. *There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon humankind: those to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that they lack nothing of all that they desire, yet God does not enable them to enjoy these things, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous ill. A man may beget a hundred children, and live for many years; but however many are the days of his years, if he does not enjoy life's good things, or has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. For it comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered; moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he. Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to one place?*

All human toil is for the mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied. For what advantage have the wise over fools? And what do the poor have who know how to conduct themselves before the living? Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire; this also is vanity and a chasing after wind. Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what human beings are, and that they are not able to dispute with those who are stronger. The more words, the more vanity, so how is one the better? For who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life, which they pass like a shadow? For who can tell them what will be after them under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 8:14-15. *There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.*

When I began this sermon series last week, I suggested that we all live in a certain amount of denial, that we avoid thinking about death. The thing is, death simply feels wrong to us. We have this deeply ingrained sense that there is meaning and purpose in life and beyond. We bear the conviction that we are somehow connected to eternity, particularly touched by God, but if that's so, then the fact that we die like every other animal feels absurd. This is what the author of Ecclesiastes is struggling with in chapter 6. In light of eternity, our brief life here just feels pathetic. Even those people who seem to have everything this life has to offer – wealth, honor, family – can't really enjoy it. They're just going to die, and then what's the point of all that stuff? It'll just go to someone else who also won't enjoy it and, likely as not, will just screw up all their hard work, anyway. It makes the things we strive for in this life feel like a bad joke. Ecclesiastes 5:10: *The one who loves money will never be satisfied with money It's all pointless.* Then, in 6:7: *All your hard work may feed your mouth, but it will never satisfy your appetite.* As he says all through the book: *Pointlessness of pointlessness, everything is pointlessness.*

Now our tendency might be to roll our eyes and think this guy's just a miserable depressed old codger that we should ignore. Well, he may be depressed. But before we ignore him, is he right? He says that the things that most of us strive for are money, honor, fame, power. Is he right? He then points out that all these things are made irrelevant by death. Is he right? Yes, and yes. There has to be more meaning to life than just dying with more money in the bank than someone else. But we can't find that deeper meaning until we face the reality of death honestly. As long as we refuse to honestly acknowledge the limits of our lives, we will continue to pursue these limited, superficial goals. So we dream of being rich, even though Reality TV has made it abundantly clear that there is no necessary connection between wealth and contentment, that in fact rich people are often frantically unhappy. *The one who loves money will never be satisfied with money.* We dream of never having to work again, nothing to do but sit on the beach, even though in fact we'd be bored to tears there within two hours. We dream of becoming famous, but fame is incredibly fleeting. How many internet click-bait articles on "Where Are They Now?" – about people who used to be famous and now are forgotten – do we have to see before that sinks in? We dream of becoming powerful, but why? We despise every powerful person we know. You don't have to be particularly observant to see that all these cherished values of our culture are weak, thin, superficial, fleeting, and have nothing to do with actual contentment or purpose. But we seek them anyway, because the alternative, recognizing that our lives are largely pointless, is too horrible to contemplate.

By the way, I include myself and the United Methodist Church in all that I've just said. Look, none of this is new. You've heard me and other preachers speak against materialism and the shallowness of the world before. But why in heaven's name would you listen to us? We aren't any different. We Servants of God measure ourselves by the same superficial standards. Ooh, he's the pastor of a *Big Church*. Translation: I bet he's got a huge salary. Ooh, he was asked to speak at Annual Conference! Translation: Wow, he's influential and famous! We measure our churches in terms of size, wealth, property – the same superficial, temporary standards that everyone else uses. We, too, are afraid to move past the surface to look at deeper sources of meaning.

But let's at least try. One thing that all these superficial goals have in common is that they act as if this life is the only one that matters. Devoting yourself to the pursuit of wealth or power or fame only makes sense if (a) this life is all there is or (b) whatever life there may be after death has nothing to do with this one. But that's not what we believe, and that's not what we teach. We believe that Jesus lived this life, died, then rose from the dead and resumed life with a new and glorious body. Notice the word I used: *resumed*. The resurrected Christ was not a different person. Oh, he apparently looked a little different, and his body evidently had some different properties than before, but in ways that matter he was the same. For instance, he simply stepped back into his old relationships where he had left them off. He called Mary by name. He gently restored his friendship with Peter and Thomas, who had denied and doubted him. He continued teaching the same things, and – this one's matters to me – still enjoyed a good meal. For Jesus, death was not a period, but a comma, a brief interruption before continuing on as the same person who loved the same people. And Christianity teaches that we will rise like Christ.

Think for a moment how differently we might live if we took this seriously, if we saw the life we now live on this earth as nothing more than the first chapter of a much longer story. Here are a few thoughts. First, we would *not* spend much time on the fluff: hoarding our cash, clinging by desperate surgical means to our youthful appearances, sacrificing our family and friendships so as to become vice-president over our company. All that stuff will be gone by chapter two. Second, we might actually enjoy our lives now. Enjoy your food, drink, friendships. Dance a little. Even the author of Ecclesiastes, half a millennium before Christ, recognized this. In 8:15, he says, "I recommend enjoyment. Enjoy your food, your drink, and your life. Life is hard work: why make it harder?" I am emphatically *not* saying, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." No, I'm just saying, "Learn *how* to enjoy life, because you've got a lot more of it coming." Third, if this life is just the first few pages of a very long story, then let's agree on this: holding grudges is worthless. Hating other people, taking revenge, clinging to resentments – all that seems to stem from our need for bad people to get their comeuppance *now!* We need to *see* it happen, or we feel justice is denied. No, it isn't. God's time is not restricted to our earthly life. Nor is God's justice and mercy. Leave it to God. Finally, and most importantly, when we see this life as the warm-up for our real life, we might focus on the one thing that actually does last forever: love. If we live our lives on this earth in such a way that we end this chapter having fostered deep and genuine relationships with God and with others, why then our next chapter has a great place to start.

I don't want to oversimplify, but I do want to try to bring this all together. We, as people of the Resurrection, as followers of Christ, do not believe that this world is all that there is. Nor do we believe that this world is the most important part of all that is. We serve an eternal God, who transcends this life and whose love for us steps lightly over death itself. We should live with that awareness. The meaning of our life is not determined by what we gain here – by how much we have or how influential we are at the time of our death. No, true meaning for this life is not determined by what we gain, but by what we become. The church father Irenaeus called this life a "vale of soul-making." Step by step, choice by choice, relationship by relationship, love by love, we are shaping ourselves to resume life in the presence of God.

Only by recognizing the reality of death can we see the life that overcomes death. And only when we live life in that awareness do we find meaning. Only then do we live well.

Final word: So here is my charge for you today as you leave. Go out and become the sort of person that you would like to spend eternity with. Because you will. We are an Easter people.