

God lived out in the world in the service of others. In other words, striving to see the world as God sees the world can bring meaning to all aspects of our lives.

Is that easy to do? Hardly! I personally like the feeling of security that comes from my retirement savings. At times I can't escape my worries about my own unknown future. I like the pleasure of international travel...our capability to buy what we want. We are so immersed in a society that pursues these things that looking at the world as God looks at it is a steep challenge. I suspect this reality is why Jesus told his listeners that it is something that takes "striving": great effort.

But the striving pays off. Personal story. One weekend about 25 years ago I was the volunteer on-call chaplain for University Hospital in London ON. That weekend I was called in on three occasions to be with 3 different families because the three fathers had died of heart attacks in Emergency. That experience really disturbed me for more than a week because I saw myself and my own mortality in those three dads. Move forward 20 years. About 5 years ago I woke up one morning and discovered that I couldn't walk up 6 steps without chest pain. That was a surprise! As I waited 5 days in Rockyview for my new stents, every day I discovered I could walk less than the day before, before the chest pain came on. My mortality was no longer hypothetical...it was possibly imminent. I reflected on life and I saw that it was well with my soul. In those 20 years that transpired from those Emergency Room experiences to that moment I was in a different stage in life, certainly. But (to use Qoheleth's language) I appreciated that no one can avoid the moment of disaster when it catches you like a cruel net. I appreciated that it is better to enjoy what you hold in one hand than scramble for a second handful. I had a kingdom of God perspective...looking at the world from God's point of view. There's eternal life in which I am embraced in God's love forever. So I was content. Now, speaking honestly, I am pleased with the additional 5 years the doctors have made possible for me (...and counting). But what a gift of grace I received in that hospital room as I reflected on my life. What a gift. Jesus also assured us, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father desires to **give you** the Kingdom" (Luke 12:32). That suggests the striving for the kingdom isn't as hard as might first suppose. As we do—seeking to see the world as God sees it—Jesus assures us that everything else follows. Thanks be to God.

“Summing Up Ecclesiastes”

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Text: Ecclesiastes 9: 7 - 10, Ecclesiastes 2: 24 – 26,

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This is the second last sermon of our summer reflection series on the Book of Ecclesiastes...and I am doing things a little out of order. Today is the wrap-up reflection, but I still have one more on the topic of work for the Labour Day weekend.

As we've seen, the author of Ecclesiastes—Qoheleth—was exploring the meaning of life through his practice of using wisdom. Throughout his book he held up various things humans invest their focus, time and energy in their pursuit of the meaning of life, hoisting them up like piñatas so he could beat on them with the stick of his philosophical thought. This summer we covered his topics of wisdom itself, the meaning of time, our presumption that we can control life even though our future is always uncertain, and (next week) finding meaning in wealth and work. In this book Qoheleth also covers hedonism (finding life's meaning through enjoying pleasure), and he also wades into the topic of agnosticism as he struggles with the question "but how much can we know about God anyways?". In the end every piñata he hung up he knocked down. He tells us that these things we pursue are not as meaningful as we might first suppose. Time and again he has told us, it is like "chasing after the wind." In essence, he said that we do it to ourselves. The Jerusalem Bible translation of one passage puts it directly: "God made us simple; our complex problems are of our own devising" (7.29).

So after swatting away what he deemed to be hollow pursuits, what was Qoheleth's recommendation to his readers? He had two. The first is found in the regular refrain he always went back to: find life's meaning in the moment, make life meaningful in the moment. He expressed this in different ways. Enjoy food. Find happiness in your work. Love your spouse. Make sure your hair is oiled. Accept the portion of life you are given. As we find in chapter 4, "better is one handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil." Qoheleth wrote, "God made us simple", and so for Qoheleth the meaning of life was simple.

I've said that I consider Ecclesiastes a gospel for the 21st century because so many of the concerns of this book are the concerns of our age. Hedonism—living for the pursuit of personal pleasure—is a big deal today. As is the pursuit of wealth. As is scrambling for control of the hecticness and vagaries of life. As is crafting a great reputation (although today we call that managing your 'personal brand'). [How's Justin's brand doing these days?]

So, given that the concerns of Qoheleth's life are so similar to our own, it is not a surprise to find in our society movements that promote simplicity in life. For example, North America's eminent trend watcher—Faith Popcorn—says one of the 17 major trends worth noting today is one she calls “cashing in.” Cashing in is about dropping out of the rat race. This tends to be for people making later-in-life career decisions. On the other end of the spectrum there is a significant trend among Millennials called Minimalism. Minimalism promotes being content with a place to live that is 1/3 the size of the suburban house Millennials grew up in, turning their back on consumerism, desiring to have experiences (like travel) in place of possessions. We also see the Slow Food movement. And the meditative practice Mindfulness is everywhere.

So our society has figured out the same thing as Qoheleth as a response to modern life. But for Christians simplicity is not just to be a reaction to a busy life but instead can be an intentional practice that shapes our lives. Historically the spiritual practice of simplicity was at the heart of monasticism that began back in the 3rd century. It is core to the Christian life of Quakers, Mennonites, Amish and Hutterites. From our own heritage the spiritual practice of simplicity was promoted by the Puritans. The paradox of this practice is that it is both easy and difficult. It's easy in that it is a practice supported by God's grace, and—like any practice—it becomes simple once it becomes habit. But it can also be a struggle at times as we manage our calendars and our desires. Jesus taught around this. Recall his famous teaching: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21). Simplicity in the stuff we collect and the stuff we put in our calendars allows for greater space in our lives to live out the great summaries of the Law: to love the Lord with all our heart and to love our neighbour. The less simple our lives the less time, focus and energy we can have to do this. But simplicity in living also provides the space to live out the life Qoheleth recommends to us. The time to savour food. To enjoy companionship. To take a walk on a lovely day. To, as they say, “smell the flowers.”

My big lesson in this came through a personal experience in the 1990's. We were living in London Ontario and I was the Associate Minister at one of our denomination's largest congregations. I was averaging 55 hours of work per week. In addition, I was working away on my Doctoral degree. We had a young family. One day I joined our son Daniel laying on the floor playing with Lego. I was immersed...totally focused in play with him. Then a thought struck me: this is a beautiful moment! A precious moment. A moment that was so rare because my life was far from simple. That experience taught me that if I wanted to find life's meaning in the moment, make life meaningful in the moment (as Ecclesiastes encourages) then I needed to work at simplicity. The same applied to my faith: I was spending so much time serving God that I neglected my soul. Like all spiritual practices it is a discipline. 25 years later it is the same but

different. Last Sunday evening I found myself lying on the floor with my oldest son Paul, showing him how to repair his clothes dryer. It seems we've graduated from Lego, but it was still a meaningful moment allowed by a practice of simplicity. And also made possible by following Qoheleth's encouragement to find enjoyment in your work. It's the most fun I've ever had repairing a broken appliance. And I felt that because I lived into the moment as a meaningful one.

So Qoheleth had two recommendations for us to find real meaning in life, and the second is captured in our other reading this morning. This encouragement begins with “who can find enjoyment apart from God?” In our day and age this assertion can appear pretty questionable because we all know a lot of people who enjoy life greatly and give no consideration to God. From polls it looks like this includes a majority of Canadians. But Qoheleth goes on, and says an interesting thing. He writes, “God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to those who please God, but to others God gives the work of gathering and heaping.” I think in the 21st century we would call this a difference in attitude. Outlook. Perspective. Everyone in life faces heavy lifting of some kind at some time: physically, economically, emotionally, spiritually. But Qoheleth is saying that those who keep their focus on God see the heavy lifting differently: as a place to gain wisdom and understanding about life, as a moment to find joy. In other words, knowing and honouring God can shape how we understand our present moment...and can foster a meaning in life that is substantial.

By way of illustration, our thoughts can quickly go to the belief that “every day is a gift from God.” Certainly if that is our attitude and perspective it can foster joy in the moment (“I have the privilege and opportunity to live fully alive today”), even if we find our day filled with our unique form of “gathering and heaping.” It is still a miracle.

But Jesus would have us go further. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught this one core idea: “Strive first for the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). What would Jesus say to Qoheleth if they were to sit down and talk together about all the topics Qoheleth explored? Jesus would agree with Qoheleth that the pursuit of security and meaning through things like one's work, exerting control, pleasure, reputation, wisdom, wealth...that these pursuits are setting our sights too low and can prove to be empty pursuits. Jesus said pursue first the Kingdom of God and the other things will come along. One way I think we can fairly read this encouragement is that Jesus is calling us to an alternative attitude, outlook, perspective. If we work away at looking at the world as God looks at the world, what will that do? I think it will shift what we find pleasure in. It will make us more “content with our discontent.” We will feel less trepidation about the unknown future because we hope in God. We can perhaps see our work as our vocation before