

“Poor, Poor Cynical Me”

Back in the 1980s there was an alternative pop singer whose sound and look seemed a throwback to Buddy Holly, but the lyrics to his songs were definitely of the 80s. His love songs were about city girls with angst and insecurity. The guys who courted them were just as insecure and anxious, but in a Midwestern unsophisticated way. The musician I am talking about even played Buddy Holly in a movie the physical resemblance was so remarkable. His name is Marshall Crenshaw. One of the songs off of his first album was called “Cynical Girl.” The first verse of that song is “Well, I’m goin’ out / Goin’ out lookin’ for a cynical girl / Who’s got no use for the real world / I’m lookin’ for a cynical girl.” It is a fun song with a rockabilly twang to it, and sensitivity to the zeitgeist of the era.

As fun as the song is true cynicism is a disease of the heart that comes from too much pain, disappointment, betrayal and abuse. Merriam Webster defines cynical as “contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives” and “based on or reflecting a belief that human conduct is motivated primarily by self-interest.” I suppose many of us can be cynical at times; however if we look at life from this standpoint all the time it is debilitating to heart and soul.

Jesus’ parable and Ecclesiastes both address this perverse worldview. Jesus alludes to it while the Ecclesiastes addresses it head on. Jesus tells the parable of the foolish rich man who having a bumper crop decides to build another barn to house the produce of his land. He already has one barn full, which is more than enough for him and his family, but more is better. So he stores up the riches only to die and have it all left to his heirs. I am sure they were happy to get this great haul, but what did it do for the dead man. As the saying goes, “you can’t take it with you.” If instead of storing up his treasure he had stored up treasure in heaven by being faithful to God, perhaps his life would have been better and he would not have died from the stress of safeguarding his wealth. If instead he shared his abundance with those in need perhaps he would have gone to his grave a happier man knowing he had provided for others instead of hoarding.

The writer of Ecclesiastes is by tradition King Solomon in his old age. He has grown cynical from the wisdom he has gained through his long life. He writes, “I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me.” He calls this endless toil and greed nothing but vanity. Vanity as he uses it plays on several of the definitions of the word. One is the “excessive pride in or admiration of one’s own achievements.” This striving and toil that he hates so much is only to bolster his ego and pride in himself. He does not work for the joy of it or the good of the accomplishment, it is so he can boast and look valuable in the eyes of others.

The other definition of vanity is something that is “worthless and futile.”¹ Clearly the writer of Ecclesiastes feels that his toil has been a waste of time. Indeed, later in this book he admonishes the reader to enjoy life as it comes. Enjoy the pleasures we are given enjoy your brief life for all living things die.

¹ Both definitions are from the Oxford Languages online.

That is a cynical and nihilistic valuation of life. I expect it is one that many of us come to at times. If this was Solomon writing in his old age we can see where all his achievements and striving may have felt pointless, especially if he had the foreknowledge that the kingdom he and his father David built would fall to pieces after his death. .

If we come to the conclusion that all of life is like “chasing after wind” we may find safety only in isolating ourselves from the possibility of pain. But that is a two edged sword for when we do that we also isolate ourselves from joy.

C.S. Lewis put it this way:

“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.”²

I do not think that being impenetrable to hurt is worth the cost of cynicism. For by being impervious to hurt we also become impervious to creativity, joy, love, and wonder. These are the emotions and gifts that we are made for. If life is just a grumpy, hollow, trudge toward death there is no good in it. We are good for little in this world if we cannot see the spark and feel it in ourselves.

Recently I have enjoyed reading the posthumously published book of writings by Rachel Held Evans. She was one of the most positive and powerful writers on Christianity until her untimely death in 2019. In the book *Wholehearted Faith* she writes:

I'll be the first to admit that I am prone to cynicism... Here's the thing: Cynicism is evidence of having given up and given in. Cynicism is calcified anger. Cynicism is your once-tender heart now calloused and hardened. Cynicism looks like strata of sedimentary rock, each layer of protective distance compressing and solidifying the layer beneath—distance from your pain, distance from others' suffering, distance from the possibility that things might be more complicated than they seem on the surface. Cynicism feels like spiritual Novocain, numbing your whole range of deeply human emotion, because those feelings reflect frightening vulnerability and open up the possibility of yet more disappointment.³

No matter the temptation to seal ourselves off from disappointment, our wholehearted faith calls us back into engagement, vulnerability, and love. No matter how often we retreat because of disappointment in others, our call from Jesus is to engage again selflessly. No matter how good it can feel to be self-righteously correct in our assessments of the unredeemable world love calls us back to care again. Caring for the world, our neighbors and our self is the only way to be truly human and truly Christian.

² From *The Four Loves* by C. S. Lewis

³ From *Wholehearted Faith* by Rachel Held Evans with Jeff Chu