

“I Swear it’s not too Late”

“Vanity of vanities all is vanities” is one of the great lines of scripture. It is so poetic that I think not of the Bible but of Shakespeare. Although it is most certainly is from The Book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is an interesting book because it has numerous pithy sayings such as this one and “there is nothing new under the sun.” Ecclesiastes also contains the poem that Pete Seeger set to music and with which The Byrds had a hit

“To everything (turn, turn, turn)
There is a season (turn, turn, turn)
and a time to every purpose under heaven.”¹

Another fascinating aspect of Ecclesiastes is how it relates to other books in the Hebrew Bible. Traditionally three books were said to have been written by King Solomon. The Song of Solomon or Song of Songs was attributed to the young Solomon. It is a long love poem supposedly written in his passionate youth. The Book of Proverbs full of sayings, aphorisms and wisdom which were marks of his kingship was thought to be of his middle age. Ecclesiastes was purported to be the book of Solomon’s old age. At this point he is world weary and cynical. He has seen it all and decided it was not worth seeing. Everything is vanity. Everything is ephemeral. Or as combat soldiers in Vietnam said, “It don’t mean nothing.”

I am not ready to accept that these three books represent the arc of life God has in mind for us. Old age can be a time we get jaded it can also be a time of celebration and continuing discovery. I do not believe it is inevitable that we become apathetic and dispirited.

However, it does seem that our society has become just that in response to the epidemic of gun violence. Mass shootings no longer seem to shock us. They have become another blip in the news cycle. We watch the horror on TV while eating supper as the talking heads wonder what caused this man to kill people at random. Then we hear the tired response of “thoughts and prayers” from elected officials.

As people of faith we have more choices than world weary cynicism. While King Solomon, or whoever wrote Ecclesiastes, might have been a pessimist and a misanthrope that is not the message of the Bible. The biblical message is one of God’s love for humanity and desire for goodness for all people.

Jesus’ response was to confront the skeptical and co-opted leaders of his time. The Sadducees and Temple Scribes willingly went along with their Roman overlords in order to keep power. These men of God were so interested in the power and prestige that was afforded them as the keepers of the Temple that they acquiesced to the Roman Emperor in almost every aspect of life. When Jesus confronted them he accused them of serving a different “Father” than the one that

¹ “Turn! Turn! Turn!” by Pete Seeger. For more about this song visit https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turn!_Turn!_Turn!

he served.² A few like Nicodemus listened but most were too in love with power to admit their failings. Their answer was to kill Jesus for speaking truth to their power. It kept them in power for a little while, but less than 40 years later their Temple was gone and so were they.

When Jesus began his ministry he read from the Book of Isaiah where it said,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”³

I suppose Jesus could have asked for the scroll of Ecclesiastes and read the passage we heard today, but instead of giving in to the *zeitgeist* of his era he took the harder task to bring the gospel to the poor, release to those imprisoned in sin and misery, to heal those who were sick, and to proclaim the year of God’s favor.

Jesus says there are two commandments above all others, to love God and to love our neighbor. We cannot, in the slightest sense, say that we love our neighbor if we stand by and allow our neighbors to be murdered at school, while shopping or in church. We may not know what to do. We may feel frustrated and at a loss in the face of the powers that seem fine with the status quo. We can be like the writer of Ecclesiastes, who is not in the mainstream of biblical thought, and throw our hands up in the air. We can say that it is nothing more than “chasing after wind.”

Or as one of my favorite writers, Wendell Berry says in his poem “The Real Work.”

“It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.”

We may feel impeded by the powers of this age but that is not the reason to give it to them. Let us roll up our sleeves for the real work. Let us encourage those who have given in to the new Sadducees and Romans to begin singing a new song. Let us sing the song of our Lord; a song of hope, peace and love for one another. Let us proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and bring good news all.

² John 8:19

³ Luke 4:18-19 NRSV