**ENJOY LIFE**

**Loving Generously Series**

October 16, 2016

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Proverbs 19:17

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

Ecclesiastes 9:9

Ecclesiastes 8:15

1 Timothy 6:6-8

1 Peter 3:10

Lectionary Texts

Jeremiah 31:27-34

Psalm 119:27-104

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

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his ancient and fascinating document, The Book of Ecclesiastes, both intrigues and disturbs its readers. It is so denigrated by some Christians, that they have wondered why it is in the Bible at all. However, if you have read the French Existentialists, you will find yourself in familiar territory. Certainly, the words of the Preacher, which the word Ecclesiastes means, are memorable and have enriched the English language with several well -known phrases, such as:

Eat, drink and be merry… (8:15)

A fly in the ointment … (10:1)

There is a time for everything… (3:1)

Cast your bread upon the waters… (11:1)

There is nothing new under the sun … (1:9)

This phrase “under the sun” occurs some thirty times in the book, and is the key to understanding it. It means “our view of the world, leaving God out of the picture”.

The book describes life without God; it digs over the ground and stares into the abyss. “Vanity of vanities”, says the preacher, “all is vanity” (1:2).

In other words, much of life seems pointless, it is all in vain; life is meaningless and absurd. If you understood the absurdity of Becket’s play Waiting for Godot, you will understand this book. We don’t know who wrote it. It wasn’t Becket, Camus, Sartre or Nietzsche or even Dostoyevsky, though this book must have inspired him.

This is not a book that is a favorite of most pastors, although there are portions that we do like to quote. It seems to me that the book has four primary themes.

1. Human Yearning
2. Moral Values
3. Our Fallen Nature
4. Ultimate Accountability.

Now, it is not our intent today to spend all our time in Ecclesiastes or to root out these four themes, but we might thing about a few verses at the outset of this message that this author (a preacher of sorts since Ecclesiastes means “the preacher”) he has composed, words like these:

*I undertook great projects. I built houses and planted vineyards…
I bought slaves, owned herds, amassed silver and gold…
I acquired singers and a harem as well…
I denied myself nothing… and what does pleasure accomplish?
It was a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.* (2:4-11)

*The eye never has enough seeing or the ear its fill of hearing.* (1:8)

*Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.* (5:10) – does that have a modern ring to it?

*All man’s efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied.* (6:7)

*When I applied my mind to know wisdom…and saw all that God has done – no-one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.* (8:16-17)

The preacher sees a problem with our yearnings and they are tied to our morality. Human beings tend to become confused and lost when trying to sort out the differences between our yearnings and our morality.

The writer observes greed, hypocrisy, oppression, injustice, laziness, cursing and jealousy. He finds that “Patience is better than pride” (7:8), that envy is a driving force in human achievement (4:4), that “bribery corrupts the heart”, that “anger takes up residence in the lap of fools” (7:9), that there is righteousness as well as wickedness, and “no-one knows whether love or hate awaits him” beyond the grave (9:1).

We cannot live in this world without being bombarded by moral values and human choices. And we cannot live comfortably in this world in the face of evil. But where do these values arise The moment you admit that some behaviors are good and others are evil, you must either conclude that these are ultimate realities which point beyond ourselves, or that they are merely convenient, mutually agreed ‘house rules”, invented by humanity itself.

So famous atheist writer and speaker Richard Dawkins has now admitted that moral values, including rape, are arbitrary and not wrong in any absolute sense. And of course, once you agree that morality is created by our culture and has no absolute basis, you have no grounds left for saying that your values are better than anyone else’s. There is no grounding for them to be better; they are just different.

Many contemporary ethicists therefore speak of values evolving, as though there was some relentless moral progress that could be documented. Not only is there no objective standard to evaluate this but some of the most appalling cultures in history have existed within living memory, whether the Nazi holocaust of the Jews, or the brutal regimes and mass killings of Stalin, or Mao Tse Tung or Pol Pot. On what criteria can we distinguish between moral values other than personal preference? Unless moral values lie in the character of God himself, we cannot meaningfully speak about the objective nature of good or evil. So our consciences make it very difficult to stop worrying and enjoy life.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Maybe this is why Ecclesiastes gives us verses like these:

**Ecclesiastes 8:15**

*15So 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.*

**Ecclesiastes 9:9**

*9Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.*

Of course if you ask most people about any verses in Ecclesiastes, including those of us who are preachers, we’ll comment on Ecclesiastes 3 which Carrie beautifully read for us this morning.

Most of us learned the words because Pete Seeger used this passage as the basis for a song he wrote in the late 1950s - *"Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season).”* The lyrics, except for the title which is repeated throughout the song and the final two lines, are adapted word-for-word from the English version of the first eight verses of the third chapter of the biblical [*Book of Ecclesiastes*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesiastes). The song was originally released in 1962 as "To Everything There Is a Season" on [The Limeliters](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Limeliters)' album *Folk Matinee* and then some months later on Seeger's own *The Bitter and the Sweet.* But, the song became an international [hit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hit_single) in late 1965 when it was [covered](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cover_version) by the American [folk rock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folk_rock) band [The Byrds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Byrds), entering at #80 on the hit parade, October 23, 1965, before reaching #1 on the [*Billboard* Hot 100](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billboard_Hot_100) chart on December 4. In the U.S., this song holds distinction as the #1 hit with the oldest lyrics. The words come directly from Ecclesiastes chapter 3, but we seldom read down to verse 12 which reads this way:

**Ecclesiastes 3:12**

*12I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; 13moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil*.

So, there is the suggestion that we need to enjoy life, which is something that should come rather naturally. However, we tend to make it something hard to do, something at which we must work. Maybe that is because we tend to meander off into pursuits that aren’t the kind of thing that God prefers.

When we read from 1 Timothy 6:6-19 we saw the writer contrasting God's true servants with shameless ministers who imagine that "godliness is a means of gain" (v. 5b). This is something that is hard for those of us who are preachers to read. According to the writer, these greedy pretenders of the gospel are arrogant, lack understanding and relish the opportunity to engage in fruitless debates. Despite well-conceived schemes to impress others with their purported knowledge of the faith, they nonetheless display a multitude of unsavory attributes such as "envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions and wrangling" (vv. 3-5a). Why? It is because they seek above everything else to increase their own financial status. In short, the adage -- "by their fruits you will know them" -- proves to be true yet again.

Then after describing these ungodly teachers, Paul uses this character foil in order to present an alternative model for how honorable teachers and ministers of the faith ought to live and suggests that living differently will help us to enjoy life. Through a series of contrasts in verses 6-19, he instructs Timothy and other believers in the art of righteous living. To use Paul's earlier words, he offers "teaching that is in accordance with godliness."

Now when I think about enjoying life, I also think about enjoying food. The two go hand in hand for many of us and in my case this was probably supported by the conversations at home. During most of my elementary school years our family lived in Steubenville, Ohio. We had moved to McCauslin Manor which was on the top of the hill almost overlooking the city. On Saturday’s I would take the bus downtown to the YMCA for SMATY (Saturday Morning at the Y). Along the way, I did my part as a Shabbos goy (Yiddish: שבת גוי). Now a Shabbos goy, is commonly a young male who is a non-Jew who performs certain types of work (melakha) which Jewish religious law (halakha) enjoins an observant Jew from doing on the Sabbath (Friday Sundown to Saturday sundown).

The Endich family who lived across the street had asked me to do this task and it involved stopping at the Synagogue along the way, turning on the lights, making sure that the place was warm or cool, getting out the yarmulkes and prayer books and the like. On the way home, before catching the bus in front of the HUB department store, I would return to the Synagogue, put things away and lock the building.

The Endich boys were among my closest friends. They celebrated Christian holidays with our family and participated in events that did not compromise their Jewish principles and we celebrated Jewish events with them. I played mostly with Paul and Sylvan who were my age, but could not quite comprehend how some of the other male names in their family, all fit together. So there was Matthew, Mark, Luke Sylvan and Paul.

However, the real indicator about how our lives might progress came early most every school day morning. Mrs. Endich would stand at the door as Sylvan and I would meet in the center of the street for the walk to Harding School and say, “Now Sylvan, don’t forget your books.” My mother on the other hand would do something of the same and as I headed out the door she would say, “Now Bruce, don’t forget your lunch.” I have had a good relationship with food from an early age and do appreciate meal time – and snack time, too. But, I suspect that it would have been helpful to use a little more caution and restraint along the way.

"What's on Your Plate?" is the title of a little brochure containing guidelines published by the U.S. government. These government health guidelines have abandoned the food pyramid nutritional model and have taken on a new metaphor: my plate. Some senior citizen and youth programs have gone so far as to use actual plates that use color and clever art to designate portions for protein, fats, fruits and vegetables, etc. From the government website: "My Plate illustrates the five food groups that are the building blocks for a healthy diet using a familiar image -- a place setting for a meal. Before you eat, think about what goes on your plate, in your cup or in your bowl." The five food groups are: fruits, grains, vegetables, protein and dairy.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I also discovered a list of four foods that can kill you.

**Four Foods that Can Kill You**

**+ Sugar.**Sugary drinks, especially, account for a big chunk of the obesity problem in the United States. A single 350-ml soft drink can have 30 grams of sugar in it, which is a lot of empty calories with no nutritional value. Alcohol and even fruit juices can up the sugar intake as well. An average American diet involves just drinking about 350 calories a day, or 20 percent of the recommended daily calorie count.

**+ "Diet" products.** Think you can avoid the sugar by drinking diet soda or by eating a salad with diet dressing as a side dish to that cheeseburger? Think again. Diet foods trick us into thinking we're eating healthy when all they're really doing is stimulating our appetites to eat more of whatever it is we're consuming, thus adding more unnecessary calories. That's not to mention the cocktail of harmful chemicals that wind up replacing the sugar we're trying to avoid in the first place.

**+ Processed foods.** There's a reason why you can't stop eating those chips or quit pounding down a package of cookies. They taste great! Part of the reason, however, is that they're rich in harmful but tasty ingredients like hydrogenated oil, high fructose corn syrup (i.e. sugar), and trans fats. Trans fats are known to raise your bad cholesterol while lowering the good, thus contributing to heart disease.

**+ Fried foods.** In a culture where we love to fry everything, including Twinkies, and where french fries are a staple, we neglect the fact that foods fried in oil have high saturated fat content, often including those nasty trans fats. Again, it tastes awesome, but visiting the Colonel and pounding down his chicken with the special herbs and spices isn't going to make you healthy.

As I looked at this, it hit me that not everything that looks good or even tastes good actually is good. And if this is true with food, it is probably true about lots of things. We might go so far to say that some things help us enjoy life for only a moment or two, but other approaches to those same things may help us to enjoy life for a really long, long time. Furthermore, what applies to actual food may also apply to us spiritually, morally and physically.

**Healthy spiritual food**

So, what's the alternative? How can we fill up our plates, both the culinary and the spiritual, in ways that make us rich in health and vitality? In writing to his young protégé Timothy, the apostle Paul outlines a strategy for getting rid of the over-enriched junk in our lives and, instead, becoming rich in the things that matter.

In chapter 6, Paul warns Timothy of those who think that "godliness" is a means of material gain (v. 5). In Paul's Jewish world, many believed that serving God would lead to financial wealth. Thus, they pointed to their good works in expectation of a blessing. We might think of it as an early version of the "health and wealth" gospel where one just "names and claims" wealth as a blessing from God. For Paul, however, this is the first-century equivalent of a diet soda or a processed bag of chips. It looks and tastes rich, but it's a diet full of empty calories.

Instead, Paul says, "There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these" (vv. 6-8). Paul argues for what we might call a diet of "enough-ness," or that feeling of being full of enough of the right things that we don't crave the wrong ones. As "rich" food can be harmful to the body, so the pursuit of material riches for their own sake can be harmful to the soul. In fact, Paul offers up his own list of four harmful things that people can consume that will "plunge" them into "ruin and destruction" and "pierce" them with "many pains" (v. 9-10).

**Four harmful "foods" that will absolutely destroy your spiritual life!**

**+ Discontent (v. 6)** -- As excess sugar is the basis of a lot of those harmful foods we consume, so does discontent permeate a life that is bent on overconsumption. We seem always to want what we cannot have instead of wanting what we already have. Paul argues that contentment is a key to health, that happiness is not having what you want, but wanting what you have. Contentment is recognizing that we are dependent on God's provision ("our daily bread" as Jesus puts it). It's not something we earn, but is rather a gift from God. When we are content with what we have, our appetites tend to be satiated and we can bypass the junk.

**+ Harmful desires (v. 9)** -- The pursuit of riches can cause people to fall into temptation and leave them "trapped by many senseless and harmful desires." Junk food can be addicting and junk riches can lead us to fill up on the empty promise that material gain will make us happier. Many are those who have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of money only to find that, in the end, they were poorer for it.

Two summers ago, Martha and I were in Stone Harbor, NJ and it seemed as if people were moving toward the west. This means that those on the sidewalk were heading away from the beach and toward the western side of the island that faces the mainland. Why? They were all racing to catch the sunset, those moments before the sun fades into the horizon with a rainbow of brilliant colors. We joined the throngs and as we watched a woman I had never met before on my left said, “You know, you can’t buy this.” She was right.

**+ Love of money (v. 10)** -- The old saying that "money is the root of all evil" isn't actually what Paul says here. It's not money itself that's the problem, just like fat and sugar themselves aren't the real problems in our diets. We actually need them to live, just like we need money. But we need them in moderation and we need them in perspective. When we crave money instead of merely building it into a healthy lifestyle, we're bound to make ourselves fat with it. Jesus warned us what would happen if we did so (Luke 12:16-21).

**+ Eagerness to be rich (v. 10)** -- When we're eager to fatten up on riches alone, we can become envious of those who have more than we do. The more we pursue a lifestyle beyond our means as a way of keeping up, the more likely we are to wander away from the faith that actually sustains us.

**Change in diet**

Paul tells Timothy to avoid these things like we should avoid the junk food aisle in the grocery store. Instead, we should go for the things that have a high value in spiritual nutrition: righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness (v. 11). These are things you can consume and share as much as you want!

Because God supplies what we need, Paul encourages Timothy to put those in his congregation who are wealthy on a real diet where they can see their blessings as a tool to be used by God. They adjust their consumption.

**+ Set our hopes on God and not on things (v. 17)** -- Junk food doesn't ultimately make us happy or healthy, and neither does a plethora of junk bonds. Only God -- the One who "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" -- can make us happy and content.

**+ Be rich in good works (v. 18)** -- A diet only works if there is good food to replace the bad. Paul urges people not to be known by the size of their bank accounts. Instead, they should be rich in the amount of good they do for others. Putting money to work for others provides good, nutritious fuel for the soul, burning off the excess fat and making others healthy in body, mind and spirit.

**+ Be generous and ready to share (v. 18)** -- When we share with others, we "store up the treasure of a good foundation for the future." Jesus called it "treasure in heaven," or that which puts us in line with the way of God's kingdom. A good spiritual diet will lead us to less consumption and more distribution so that others may come to know Christ and experience real, eternal life and health.

A full plate can either be a good thing or a bad thing. It just depends on what fills it up! An old adage says: "You are what you eat." Are you fast, cheap and easy? Or are you taking the time and care to eat right, spend right and share right? Are you gorging on junk from your pantry and your bank account, or are you filling your plate with good food and using your time and money wisely in the service of others?

After years of extensive research, psychologists have discovered at least nine practices -- all of which are under our control -- that lead to the enjoyment of life. What I find especially compelling is that all nine of these traits are taught in the Bible .... They are also confirmed by experience. So when it comes to overall life contentment, science, experience and Scripture appear to be in agreement. So here are the 9 attitudes that make people content and able to enjoy life:

⚫ Contented people use trials as growth opportunities.
⚫ Contented people cultivate optimism.
⚫ Contented people focus on the present.
⚫ Contented people practice forgiveness.
⚫ Contented people practice generosity.
⚫ Contented people nurture relationships.
⚫ Contented people express gratitude.
⚫ Contented people care for their bodies.
⚫ Contented people love generously. [[3]](#footnote-3)

1. Peter May, *The Book of Ecclesiastes – Absurdity Pointing to Meaning*: Peter May served on the General Synod of the Church of England from 1985 to 2010 and was Chair of the UCCF Trust Board from 2003 to 2010. He is retired.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rev. Cheri Doane, director of the Center for Community-Based Learning, Central College, Pella, Iowa, made me aware of ChooseMyPlate.gov [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Martin Thielen, Searching for Happiness: How Generosity, Faith, and Other Spiritual Habits Can Lead to a Full Life (Westminster John Knox, 2016), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)