

Life Is Brutiful
Ecclesiastes 9
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There are many parts of the Bible that may be enjoyed and understood in small, bite-sized chunks: the beatitudes, the twenty-third psalm, the passion of Christ, among others. But there are some parts of the Bible which seemingly cannot stand alone, or which make almost no sense without having to read a really large and rambling collection of verses. Any given chapter from Ecclesiastes falls into this latter category. It is almost fruitless to read any part of Ecclesiastes without reading it all, but not because there is some strong thread which ties it all together, but precisely because there isn't really one. It is a classical Biblical case of the old saying that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Tonight's reading of the ninth chapter is interesting and enlightening on its own merits, but reading only it leaves us with an incomplete picture of what the great teacher of Ecclesiastes wishes to tell us. And so, I am not going to go into great detail about this particular chapter, but I am going to ask you to go home and read the whole book sometime this week to see what I mean.

I did, however pick this chapter from among the other parts of the book because it gives a representative sample of some of the recurring themes, although with just one mention of one of the book's most famous of expressions, "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity." That sentiment is indeed part of what this chapter expresses,

namely that as much as we might wish the opposite, life, even life under God, does not play by the rules we might wish to create, but rather according to the sometimes mystifying rules God has imposed, rules which at times seem rather arbitrary and frankly sometimes pretty unfair. If we made the rules, the righteous would always win out over the sinners, the wise over the fool. If we made the rules, we would all get what we deserve: a long, happy life if we do the right things, and a swift and appropriate punishment if we do not. If we made the rules, there would be some consistency and predictability to life that would prevent tragedies like that which took place in Akron, Ohio about a year ago, when a gang member agreed to kill someone in order that he might move up in the ranks of the organization. The person he killed, Karma Tamang, was a Bhutanese refugee who had escaped to the United States with his wife and three young children to begin a new life. His crime, apparently, was being an immigrant and sitting in his car in a parking lot checking his messages. This week, at the sentencing hearing for the murder, Karma Tamang's widow described him as "a very kind man who tried to help everyone. He was a gentleman who never hurt anyone." This, according to Ecclesiastes, is not how the story is supposed to turn out, but how he knows the story frequently does turn out. Perhaps there is some justice in that the murderer was caught, that he has confessed to the killing, even that he is remorseful and wishes it had been he himself who had died in that parking lot, but the sad truth is that Karma Tamang's widow is now raising three children on her own, and mourning the loss of the

beautiful hopes and dreams that had seemed to come true following those eighteen brutal years in a refugee camp. And so, says the teacher of Ecclesiastes, “Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice... This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone.” At the same time, Ecclesiastes reminds us strongly that in the end, we are the creatures and not the Creator, that the fear of God is still the appropriate posture, and that life, as unpredictable as it may be, is still to be lived to the fullest, knowing that it comes from God and we could be hit by a bus at any moment.

If that sounds like a mixed bag, a little fatalistic, a little depressing even, then you are coming close to understanding why Ecclesiastes is included in the Bible. But why would we want as part of our Bibles such a thoroughly pessimistic perspective on life, even if it is life lived under God, as part of the truth that shapes us and that we proclaim? Well, I think it has to do with the Church’s dirty little secret. You didn’t know we had one? OK, I’ll tell you what it is. The church’s dirty little secret is that although we may be “in Christ,” life is not always fun and games, rose gardens, and unending joy. Christians suffer, Christians hide their suffering, and Christians leave the church because they feel they cannot reveal their suffering. Our frequent odes to joy, and to abundant life, and to communion with Christ are not always reflective of the way life is for many of the faithful, and we don’t often

leave room for the real doubt, pain, and suffering they experience. Too often, and probably unconsciously, we at least imply that it is a lack of faith that leads to a less than perfect life instead of acknowledging up front that, even with Christ as our guide, “Life is difficult,” as M. Scott Peck famously reminded us many years ago.

And this is precisely what Ecclesiastes does best, to bring us the unvarnished truth that we don’t really want to admit to ourselves, and to call us to be the same kind of truth-teller to those around us, not necessarily with the same words, but in his same kind of bold and honest way. I know that I’ve boiled all of Ecclesiastes down for you pretty quickly, but there is a good reason for it, namely so that I can show you what that looks like in real life. I’m going to show you a video of a woman who, without even knowing it, offers a brilliant commentary on Ecclesiastes. It’s from a Tedtalk by Glennon Doyle Melton, and I invite you to listen to what she has to say, and see how it echoes the words we’ve already read tonight, and how it might be reflected in your own life. ([Watch video](#))

Why is Ecclesiastes in the Bible? Ecclesiastes is there to remind us to take on the wise and even prophetic role of the truth-teller, even if what we have to say doesn’t always make everyone else feel as warm and fuzzy as they might want us to make them feel. Because recognizing that life is brutiful and living that life truthfully creates the kind of world in which all can claim the life God gives in Jesus Christ. Amen.