

Heartbreak

Ecclesiastes 8:9-17

October 29, 2017

Life, your life, is not all sweetness and light, is it?

Sometimes it is disappointing.

You had to reserve the campground four months in advance, so this one day is your window of opportunity to climb the mountain you've waited thirty years to climb, and it's raining. Every other day this week has been sunny and dry, but today it's raining. It's not fair.

Sometimes it is frustrating.

You have insured your automobiles with the same company for thirty-five years. You are a loyal customer, never filed a claim, but now your rates are going through the roof. You call them, threatening to take your business elsewhere, and suddenly, they're able to cut your premium in half. Why do you have to raise a stink to be treated fairly? Why aren't you rewarded just for being a loyal customer, just for being a safe driver? It's not fair.

Sometimes it makes you angry.

The United States congress is considering a tax reform package that if enacted will almost certainly benefit the wealthiest Americans at the expense of the poorest and many of those in between. It's not fair.

And sometimes it is heartbreaking.

*I saw all this when I thought about the things that are done in this world,
a world where some people have power and others have to suffer under
them.*

It's not fair. And it breaks the philosopher's heart.

We translate Qoheleth, the Hebrew title of the author of Ecclesiastes, as "philosopher" or "teacher," but when we imagine him as a philosopher, a teacher, a professor, we may think his book a mere intellectual exercise, the jaded observations of a tired old man who has studied books, and life, too long. But that would be wrong. Qoheleth is a believer, a believer with enough faith and enough courage and enough honesty to report what he sees as he sees it. And so much of what he sees breaks his heart.

He sees "a world where some people have power and others have to suffer under them."

A world where little three-year-old Sherin is force-fed the milk she doesn't want to drink by her adoptive father. Because he can. Because he has the power. She gags on the liquid and dies and is dumped outside in a drain. It is heartbreaking.

A world where countless women are sexually harassed, sexually abused, threatened and humiliated and exploited by male co-workers, by male employers, by all sorts of men with the power to do it, having the power because of their positions, having the power because of their gender, women who remain silent about the abuse for years -- for fear of losing jobs, for fear of not being believed, for fear of the shame, the shame which should not be theirs to bear, the shame which has come upon them through no fault of their own. It is heartbreaking.

A world where a young man for no reason other than the color of his skin is scrutinized more closely by people with the power to scrutinize him, judged more harshly by people with the power to judge him, put at far greatest risk of harm at the hands of people with the power to harm him, which sometimes, which too often, has fatal consequences. It is heartbreaking.

A world where professional athletes are likened to prison inmates. Now I understand that professional football players are hardly candidates for pity. And yet, their window of opportunity for employment is short and their risk of serious bodily harm is high. And dignity matters. Dignity matters.

You may have heard that a team owner said during discussions about how the league should respond to the national anthem protests: "We can't have inmates running the prison." An old, rich, white "owner" saying of his "employees," all young, mostly black, "We can't have inmates running the prison?" He has apologized, but he can't unsay it and he can't un-mean it. He, the "owner," thinks of his players as inmates? Prisoners? Chattel? Slaves? It is heartbreaking. The philosopher's heart was breaking and so are ours.

He sees a world where "sometimes the righteous get the punishment of the wicked, and the wicked get the reward of the righteous."

A world where employees are fired for refusing to cut corners or for blowing the whistle on those who do. A world where South American priests are murdered for standing up for the rights of the poor against an oppressive government. A world where civil rights activists in this nation are smeared and imprisoned and murdered for daring to speak in favor of liberty and justice for all. It is heartbreaking.

A world where money talks and violence wins and might makes right. A world where restraint and humility and pacifism are seen as weakness. A world where "winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." It is heartbreaking.

It is heartbreaking. What do you do with heartbreak? Do you notice a difference between disappointment and frustration and anger on the one hand, and heartbreak on the other? Most often we are disappointed, frustrated, angry when we believe that we ourselves have been treated unfairly. But heartbreak? We are heartbroken when life has been unfair to someone else, when life has been unfair to those we love, and even to those we hardly know. Heartbreak is a virtue. Heartbreak is an aspect of love.

But what do you do with heartbreak? What do you do when you see what the philosopher sees: a world where the weak are exploited by the powerful, a world where justice is often not served, a world where the powers of death seem to be winning? You live.

“I am convinced,” says the philosopher “that we should enjoy ourselves ... We can at least do this as we labor during the life that God has given us in this world.”

You choose to live! Daring to live, daring even to enjoy your life, is a refusal to succumb to despair, to refusal to live with fear or resignation, a refusal to submit to the powers of unrighteousness, a refusal to submit to the powers of death. Daring to live is not the only response to heartbreak -- we will do justice and we will make shalom and we will love our neighbors and we will do all of this because we love God -- but living the life we have, with joy, is an act of faith, an act of hope, an act of trust in the God whose ways we can never fully understand, but whose ways will lead us to life.