

I don't know

Ecclesiastes 6:1-12

October 15, 2017

As of July 1 next summer, my life's journey will take me into unknown territory. I have never been retired before. Some of you are retired and you've told me it's a good thing, but I've never experienced it for myself.

My whole life has been impelled by clear duties: obey my parents, do well in school, do well at my job, and my identity and sense of self-worth have come in large part from fulfilling those duties. But what comes next? Will I find as much fulfillment in my day to day activities as I do now? Will I find ways to be useful, to do things that are not merely enjoyable, but also meaningful? Will I like what I am doing more than I miss what I am no longer doing?

I don't know.

And you will enter uncharted territory, too, not only because you will be partnering with a new minister, but because the very idea of church -- what it is and what it looks like and what it does -- is changing so rapidly. Will your way of proclaiming and embodying the message of Jesus engage the minds and hearts of a new generation? Will you be able to give up what you need to give up, to change who you are and how you are, in order to better address the changing conditions of the people and the world around you?

Will a new generation of members of the First Congregational United Church of Christ emerge to take the reins of leadership, to support the costs of maintaining a vital presence here in this neighborhood, here in this town? Will the church that has been here for one hundred and sixty years, be here for another hundred and sixty? Should it? Should the church remain here in this same place, in this same way, or should the mission of this community of Christians move in an entirely different direction?

I don't know.

Our nation is entering uncharted territory. Not since the civil war have the values and allegiances that divide us so threatened to overwhelm the values and allegiances that unite us. Never before have the actions and inactions of our leaders so undermined our faith in the institutions that implement our democracy and put the continuing capacity of those institutions to fulfill their constitutional mandates in so much jeopardy. We are failing to fulfill the dream of *e pluribus unum* ("out of many one") and we are squandering our moral authority among our brother and sister nations.

Will the American experiment that has modeled for the rest of the world a new way of being together for these last two hundred and fifty years endure for another two hundred and fifty years? Or even for another fifty years?

I don't know.

We are living in a perilous time. We are more aware of the dangers that threaten this earth and the people who inhabit it than ever before, but it is also true that the dangers themselves are more numerous and more potent than ever before. Will God spare us? Will God spare us from another worldwide war? Will God spare us from the devastation of a nuclear conflagration?

Will God spare us from the effects of our own shortsightedness and selfishness, from the effects of polluting and poisoning the planet that is home to us and to our children and grandchildren? Will God come soon, to set things right, to bring into being the kingdom of shalom, the kingdom of peace, that we have so utterly failed to build?

I don't know.

I could go on. There is so much I don't know. And I make that confession to you knowing that we live in a culture that puts a premium on knowing. We value knowledge, proficiency, know-how, command. We value problem-solvers, prognosticators, people who can tell us what to do and what to expect. We like our leaders to project an air of confidence and competence. We like them self-assured, even arrogant.

And that is true even in the church. So much of American Christianity is so sure of itself, so sure that it speaks for God, so sure it is doing God's will as it raises the banner of the cross and prepares to wage war on enemies of the faith!

But I'm not sure. I don't know. I can't claim, I won't claim, to speak for God. I will only urge you to listen ... well. And I won't raise a battle standard and tell you to follow me. I will only point to the cross and invite you to follow Jesus.

There is so much I don't know. But I am in good company! The author of the book of Ecclesiastes is a kindred spirit.

How can anyone know what is best for us in this short ... life of ours -- a life that passes like a shadow?

How can we know what will happen in the world after we die?

How are the wise better off than fools?

It is like chasing the wind ...

There is so much we don't know.

I am in the company of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament and of Paul in the New Testament.

What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror.

"Like a dim image in a mirror." There is so much of ourselves and of this life that we cannot see clearly, so much that we cannot know fully.

Ecclesiastes, Paul, and Jesus.

[Blessed] are those who know they are spiritually poor; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

What does it mean to be “spiritually poor,” to be “poor in spirit,” if it doesn’t mean that you are needy, wanting, unsure? If it doesn’t mean that when it comes to things of the spirit, when it comes to knowing who God is and what God wants, there is so much you don’t know? Jesus says you are blessed, you that know you don’t know. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven belongs to you.

Is there virtue, then, in not knowing, in knowing that you don’t know? The book of Ecclesiastes bears witness to a man who seeks to experience everything there is to experience in this life, to know everything there is to know in this life, to see it and taste it and know it and weigh it, to determine what in this life has any lasting value and surpassing meaning. And he finds it all useless, like chasing the wind. The wisdom he does have, all that he does know, gains him nothing, means nothing: “How are the wise better off than fools?”

All the things we count on for fulfillment and happiness and significance prove hollow, fleeting, ephemeral, useless: wealth, honor, family, long life, hard work, wisdom, ambition. Ecclesiastes systematically dismantles every stone in the foundation of meaning upon which we might want to build our lives. And we are left with ...?

That’s the point! If you only hear Ecclesiastes as a curmudgeon, a grump, a cynic, a sourpuss, then you’ve missed the point. When all the props on which we customarily rely are taken away, what is left? Ecclesiastes is not the gospel, but Ecclesiastes prepares us to hear the gospel. To hear the gospel ...

If I follow Jesus, will I be safe? Will my life be free from tragedy and calamity?

I don’t know.

If I follow Jesus, if I do not return evil for evil, if I love my neighbor as I love myself, will it work? Will my life make a difference? Will I change people’s hearts? Will I change people’s lives?

I don’t know.

If I follow Jesus, will my life be better, happier, than if I did not?

I don’t know.

If I follow Jesus, if I walk with Jesus, will Jesus walk with me? If I live my life in and for him, will he live in and for me? If I follow Jesus, will he give me the gift of eternal life, not merely life without end, but life filled with meaning and with undiminished joy here and now?

Yes! Unequivocally, yes! This I know!