

Loosen up!

Ecclesiastes 10:1-14

November 12, 2017

Loosen up, because the grip you have on the life you are trying to perfectly control is not your grip to have -- it is God's.

That is Lauren Reisinger's take on the book of Ecclesiastes: loosen up.

Next summer, on August 18th, Lynne and I will celebrate our 40th wedding anniversary. Now that doesn't come close to matching Bob and Jo Tefft's sixty years or David and Marian Greene's seventy years, but I am proud of our almost forty years, and grateful. Very grateful because I married well, didn't I?

You know that. We didn't come to First Congregational as a package deal -- you hired a minister, not minister and wife -- but Lynne has been a blessing among you as her own person: teaching your children, making music, co-founding and coordinating our Christmas bazaar, shopping for children in Nicaragua, making you pies, making you Maine blueberry pies, caring about you, caring about you deeply and showing it. Because that's what she does. That's how she is: not about words, but about deeds, tirelessly doing the little things that make a big difference.

I am so grateful that on Sunday night, January 15, 1978, she said "Yes." There were lots of other guys after her, too, lots of other guys that would have married her, too, but she said "Yes" to me. Even after everything I put her through!

Dating me was not an easy proposition, not an undertaking for the faint of heart. Yes, I was fun. I took her sailing. We canoed. We played ping pong; we were an unbeatable doubles team. I took her to a Yale/Harvard football game.

But I was prone to melancholy and to an unrelenting and exacting examination of myself and of everything and anything that mattered to me. I was, and am, a fierce idealist, always measuring myself -- my work, my behavior, my relationships -- against nothing less than perfection.

For a while, we were "engaged to be engaged." "Engaged to be engaged?" What in the world is that? It was my idea. I knew we were more than just boyfriend and girlfriend, but engaged? Make that commitment? How could I be sure? How could I take that risk? We have to examine this carefully. We have to be sure. Let's be engaged to be engaged!

Oh, my. How did she ever put up with me?

Loosen up, because the grip you have on the life you are trying to perfectly control is not your grip to have -- it is God's.

Long story short, I loosened up. I loosened up and asked her to marry me and she said “Yes” and I have had the great blessing of living my life as her partner. And she has done her best for the last thirty-nine years of continuing to try to loosen me up. Thank you, Lynne!

I think the philosopher, author of the book of Ecclesiastes, was an idealist, and probably an oldest child. I am an idealist and an oldest child. Lauren Reisinger is an oldest child, driven too by high expectations of herself and a deep sense of personal responsibility. And you remember Ben Owen’s fondness for the book of Ecclesiastes, telling us that for him “as a dreamer and an idealist, it offers one of the more jarring and affective reality checks in all of the scriptures.” Ben is the youngest of four children, but nine years younger than his closest sibling. He is like my father who was fifteen years younger than his next youngest sister, like an only child or a “second time around” oldest child.

I think there is a reason we are drawn to the book of Ecclesiastes, a reason why we find a kindred spirit in the philosopher. He looks at his world too with an idealist’s eye, with high expectations and lofty dreams, but finds that’s just not the way the world is. Realists like my wife -- a second child by the way -- already get it, but people like me need to be told: this is the way the world is.

This is the way the world is ...

*If you dig a pit, you fall in it.
If you break through a wall, a snake bites you.
If you work in a stone quarry, you get hurt by stones.
If you split wood ...*

You’ve heard of Murphy’s Law? “If anything can go wrong, it will.” Well, the philosopher already had that law pegged a couple thousand years earlier. “If you dig a pit, you fall in it.”

Do you get the sense that as the book of Ecclesiastes is winding down toward its conclusion the philosopher is assembling a set of various and sundry wise sayings, like the book of Proverbs?

Dead flies can make a whole bottle of perfume stink, and a little stupidity can cancel out the greatest wisdom.

Or,

*If your ruler becomes angry with you, do not hand in your resignation;
serious wrongs may be pardoned if you keep calm.*

Or,

*It is smarter to plan ahead ... knowing how to charm a snake is of no use if
you let the snake bite first.*

Do you think so? Do you think these are merely a collection of random proverbs?

But the rest of the book has been so personal. The philosopher recounts his pursuit and attainment of wisdom and wealth and greatness only to find it is all “chasing the wind.” He looks at the injustices and unfairnesses of life and find them heartbreaking: “A world where some people have power and others have to suffer under them.” He confronts his own mortality and indeed the mortality of every human being: “One fate comes to all alike.” We all die.

I think that he is still talking from personal experience.

If you dig a pit, you fall in it.

I think he dug a pit ... and fell in it!

If you break through a wall, a snake bites you.

I think he has been bitten by a snake! He does seem rather fixated on snakes, doesn't he? I think he's tried to split wood with a dull ax.

It happens. We take short cuts, grabbing the tool at hand, and get frustrated when it doesn't work out. We get bitten by snakes or hornets or yellow jackets or drop stones on our feet or hit our thumbs with a hammer. We fall in holes. Don't we? None of us is going to make it through this life without falling into a few holes, probably holes we ourselves have dug!

This is the way it is. This is the life we have: not life as we think it should be or life as we wish it could be, but this life.

What happens when you fall into a pit? Sometimes you just have to laugh. Sometimes you just have to laugh at yourself, and it's good for you! Because laughter is freeing. When you can laugh at yourself you can let go, let go of all that need to have to prove what you are, to prove that you are good enough, strong enough, smart enough, to deserve ... Well, what do you deserve?

I think the philosopher is laughing. I think the philosopher is having fun.

If you dig a pit, you fall in it.

If you break through a wall, a snake bites you.

It happens. So live with it! Laugh at it! Loosen up!

And what happens when you loosen up? You realize what is there, what has always been there, what has always made you not what you wish you were but who you are. Grace. Grace, the grace of God.

It is by God's grace that [we] have been saved through faith ... It is not the result of [our] own efforts, but God's gift ... God has made us what we are.

God is. And God is in what is. God does not exist in the world as it should be; God is not there. God does not exist in the world as it could be; God is not there. God does not exist in the world as we wish it would be; God is not there. God is in the world that is, a world where you fall into pits and get bitten by snakes and struggle to make headway with a dull ax.

We don't know what is going to happen next, but God will be there. We don't know what will happen after we die, but God will be there. We cannot refashion the world now into the shape and form of a world we would be pleased to live in, but God is here.

God is here ...