

## **Only one thing to say**

Ecclesiastes 11:9 - 12:14

November 26, 2017

*There is only one thing to say ...*

*After all this, there is only one thing to say ...*

*Useless, useless ... It is all useless ...*

“Hebel,” הבל. The Hebrew word is הבל. We translate it “useless” or “vanity” (“vanity of vanities, all is vanity”) or “emptiness.” Or “breath.” It is all “pfoof.” Life is “pfoof.”

Your life is “pfoof.” Does that make it bitter? Because it is fleeting? Because it is short? Because, in the end, all your labors don’t really amount to anything? Or doesn’t its brevity, its fragility, its lack of pretension, make it all the sweeter?

Your life is “pfoof.” So enjoy it! Enjoy it as long as you can!

*Do what you want, follow your heart's desire.*

Those aren’t my words. That’s the Bible! Don’t be filled with worry or pain, but be happy. Be happy, while you can, while you live, because your life is fleeting and precious and sweet.

This is the genius of Ecclesiastes: to reclaim for us the sweetness of life, the sweetness of this life which is the only life we have. Or we might better say that Ecclesiastes illumines the bittersweetness of this life. But it is the bitter that makes the sweet all the sweeter.

That’s the word I use whenever someone asks me how am I feeling about my approaching retirement: “bittersweet.” It is bitter because of the leaving, because of the losing, because of the leaving behind, but it is that bitterness that makes me appreciate all the more the sweetness of what I have been privileged to enjoy.

And it is the sweetness of being, of merely being. It’s not any record of accomplishments that makes it sweet, not any legacy or monument or metric of success, but the moment by moment sweetness of merely being.

It’s the sweetness of singing with the chancel choir or men’s quartet, or the sweetness of hearing Samantha or John sing for a memorial service, or the sweetness of hearing Miah play anything.

It’s the sweetness of praying for you, of praising God for the joys of your lives and asking God for compassion and mercy in the midst of your hurts, or the sweetness of listening to one of you pray, at a Wednesday evening Lenten service, or at the lectern leading worship.

It's the sweetness of Christmas Eve and Maundy Thursday, of Easter morning and communion, the sweetness of every time we come together to Christ's table to share bread and wine and the certainty that it is Christ who makes us one.

It is sweet and all the sweeter because it is הבל, because it is there and then gone like a breath, and not then because it serves some lasting purpose or grand dream, but because it is useless -- wonderfully, sweetly useless.

*Useless, useless ... It is all useless ...*

But don't be mistaken: this is not the one thing the Philosopher has left to say.

*There is only one thing to say ...*

*After all this, there is only one thing to say ...*

*Have reverence for God, and obey God's commands, because this is all that we were created for.*

This is the one thing to say: that we were created for reverence, for no more and for no less. We were created for awe, fear, honor, gratitude, love, for awe of God, fear of God, honor to God, gratitude to God. We were created to love and obey God, to walk in step with God's way, to live in harmony with the One who made us, to realize the fullness of what we are meant to be simply by being what we are, simply by being whose we are.

Yes, it is all useless. Of course, it is useless. But useless is not worthless! We are not made to be nothing, but to be something. We are made to be what we are. We are not made to try to become what we can never be, but we are made to be what we are.

And what are we? הבל. We are breath, God's breath. God's breath animates us. God's breath sings through our spirits and God's breath dances through our bodies. So sing! Dance! Live! Be happy. Enjoy your life. Follow your heart's desire because it is God who planted that desire in you. Eat and drink and enjoy life with the ones you love because it is God who gives you life and God who gives you to each other.

But remember: God is going to judge everything we do. God is going to judge us, not to deprive us of any of life's sweetness, but to keep us from turning what is sweet into something bitter. We were created for reverence. We were created for obedience. When we love God, when we obey God, we are what we were meant to be. And we are happy.

So we have come to the end of the book. I hope that you have been blessed as I have been blessed by listening to Ecclesiastes together. Ecclesiastes is not the whole of gospel, not nearly, but I dare say that without the book of Ecclesiastes, we risk misunderstanding the gospel. Without Ecclesiastes to rein in our ambitions and ground our dreams and to remind us of the wonderfully useless sweetness of the life we have, we are in danger of believing that the gospel teaches us to flee this life. We are in danger of believing that

the gospel teaches us to despise this life, that the gospel is about leaving all of this behind, instead of about making all of this new.

We are not saved from this life! We are saved from sin, from anything and everything that spoils and disrupts and destroys all this life is meant to be, all we are meant to be in this life with each other and with God. We are not saved from this life, but for this life, for this fleeting and precious and oh so sweet life.

Sweet and precious and fleeting ...

*So remember your Creator while you are still young.*

While you are still young! Remember your Creator and give God thanks and enjoy your life while you can

*before those dismal days and years come when you will say, "I don't enjoy life" ... when the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars will grow dim for you, and the rain clouds will never pass away ... [when] your arms, that have protected you, will tremble, and your legs, now strong, will grow weak ... [when] your teeth will be too few to chew your food, and your eyes too dim to see clearly ... [when] your ears will be deaf to the noise of the street ... [when] you will barely be able to hear the mill as it grinds or music as it plays, but even the song of a bird will wake you from sleep ... [when] your hair will turn white ... and all desire will be gone.*

It's quite an ode to old age. Not comforting, but honest. But not merely bleak, rather poetically bleak. Bittersweet, not merely bitter.

*We are going to our final resting place, says the Philosopher, and then there will be mourning.*

There will be mourning! There will be mourning because something precious has been lost. We do not mourn what doesn't matter. We do not mourn what we do not love.

*The silver chain will snap, and the golden lamp will fall and break; the rope at the well will break, and the water jar will be shattered.*

Silver chain, golden lamp, water jar. Life is good. Life is beautiful. Life is precious. Life is sweet.

*Our bodies will return to the dust of the earth, and the breath of life will go back to God, who gave it to us.*

We return to the dust of the earth because we are dust. We are no more and no less than dust, no more and no less than God-breathed dust!

This is the gospel: God's breath in us! We have lived at all only because of God's breath in us, and we live now, we live as we are meant to live now, only by God's breath in us. We live by God's breath, by God's Holy Spirit, in us, the fullness of life as it is and the promise of life as it will be.

Because this is the gospel: that the God who breathed life into us once will breath life into us again, raising us to life with Jesus on the day -- on the day, one day, one day that will be filled with the joy of a pleasant light -- on the day when God makes all things new!