

Plain and simple

Ecclesiastes 7:1-10

October 22, 2017

It is better to go to a home where there is mourning than to one where there is a party, because the living should always remind themselves that death is waiting for us all.

Sounds rather Eeyore-ish, doesn't it? You remember Eeyore?

Eeyore, the old grey Donkey, stood by the side of the stream, and looked at himself in the water.

"Pathetic," he said. "That's what it is. Pathetic."

He turned and walked slowly down the stream for twenty yards, splashed across it, and walked slowly back on the other side. Then he looked at himself in the water again.

"As I thought," he said. "No better from this side. But nobody minds. Nobody cares. Pathetic, that's what it is."

There was a crackling noise in the bracken behind him, and out came Pooh.

"Good morning, Eeyore," said Pooh.

"Good morning, Pooh Bear," said Eeyore gloomily. "If it is a good morning," he said. "Which I doubt," said he.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, Pooh Bear, nothing. We can't all, and some of us don't. That's all there is to it."

"Can't all what?" said Pooh, rubbing his nose.

"Gaiety. Song-and-dance. Here we go round the mulberry bush."

"Oh!" said Pooh. He thought for a long time, and then asked, "What mulberry bush is that?"

"Bon-hommy," went on Eeyore gloomily. "French word meaning bonhommy," he explained. "I'm not complaining, but There It Is."

(from A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*)

Eeyore was my father's nickname, not a nickname we gave him, but one he gave himself. But it fit. If my father said something was "pretty good," that was a high compliment, and he was a natural-born pessimist. If something could go wrong, then, unless you were very, very careful, there was a good chance it would!

But my father was a most perceptive and caring man, a psychotherapist who provided great help to a great many people. He was one of the most honest and self-aware and self-disclosing and humble people I have ever known, especially as he grew older. Especially as he grew old.

At the age of sixty-five, he began writing occasional letters to his three children, to my sister and brother and myself and to our spouses, calling them "letters from Eeyore." He sent us dozens of these letters for thirteen years up until his death in 2001. In one of the Eeyore letters, he quotes a reading from Henri Nouwen entitled, "Celebrating Life."

When we speak about celebration we tend rather easily to bring to mind happy, pleasant, gay festivities in which we can forget for a while the hardships of life and immerse ourselves in an atmosphere of music, dance, drinks, laughter, and a lot of cozy small-talk. But celebration in the Christian sense has very little to do with this. Celebration is possible only through the deep realization that life and death are never found completely separate. Celebration can really come about only where fear and love, joy and sorrow, tears and smiles can exist together. Celebration is the acceptance of life in a constantly increasing awareness of its preciousness. And life is precious not only because it can be seen, touched, and tasted, but also because it will be gone one day.

When we celebrate a wedding we celebrate a union as well as a departure; when we celebrate death we celebrate lost friendship as well as gained liberty. There can be tears after weddings and smiles after funerals. We can indeed make our sorrows, just as much as our joys, a part of our celebration of life in the deep realization that life and death are not opponents but do, in fact, kiss each other at every moment of our existence ...

When we have been able to celebrate life in all these decisive moments where gaining and losing -- that is, life and death -- touched each other all the time, we will be able to celebrate even our own dying because we have learned from life that those who lose it can find it.

And then my father writes:

I was struck in a new way by that reference to Matthew 16:25 "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."

Too often I do something in order to gain something else in the future. Thus what I do in the present does not receive my full attention nor my total involvement. I am waiting for tomorrow.

But tomorrow never comes. I must learn to choose today and live what is today to its fullest -- then whatever tomorrow brings will be tomorrow's day to live for God.

Rather than saving my life for tomorrow and selling my soul for then -- I must choose today and be present in today. Then I may find life.

So when I sensed the urge to write -- I lived a little bit today and shared something of me to the most important people in my life.

Your old man ...

There is wisdom in recognizing the interplay of losing and gaining, of death and life, wisdom and gladness in seeing life as it is instead of as we wish it. There is wisdom to be found in listening to Eeyore, and there is wisdom to be found in listening to Ecclesiastes!

I hope you read Ben's *Tidings* article this week. He calls Ecclesiastes his favorite book in the Bible and writes:

As a dreamer and an idealist, it offers one of the more jarring and affective reality checks in all of the scriptures.

A reality check, a check in with what is real, to be grounded again, to look at life honestly and soberly and realistically.

Ben continues:

It challenges me to reorder my priorities, live in the moment, and remember my place in the world.

There you have as good a summary of the message of Ecclesiastes as any: reorder priorities, live in the moment, remember your place in the world.

Ben concludes:

It exposes my anxieties as hollow and needless baggage and helps me loosen my tight grip on their handles ... in its starkness, it is freeing.

He gets it! Praise the Lord, Ben gets it! It is freeing! Ecclesiastes is freeing!

God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated.

We cover our faces and our souls with layer upon layer of pretense, anticipating or even guessing what we need to project in order to be accepted, in order to get what we want.

We walk around with all kinds of strings attached: envy, pride, anger, guilt, fear, regret.

And we carry heavy burdens -- heavy burdens we shoulder voluntarily! -- anxiety about the future, morbid preoccupation with the past, others' expectations and our own, the burden of performance and the burden of keeping score and the burden of keeping a tight grip ... on everything!

It is freeing to let go! It is freeing to be plain and simple, and it is freeing to hear the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. Listen again ...

A good reputation is better than expensive perfume.

Because a good perfume is artificial and superficial, while a good reputation is true adornment. A well-earned reputation, for honesty and integrity and reliability, is substantial and enduring and doesn't wear off.

The day you die is better than the day you are born.

Because the day you are born is all about possibility and potential, all about what might be, but the day you die is about what is. It's about the person you are, the person you have become. It's about those you have loved and those who have loved you. It's the culmination of a life that is gift, God's gift to you and God's gift of you to the world.

Someone who is always thinking about happiness is a fool ... a wise person thinks about death.

Because it shall be. Your death shall be, and knowing that, living with the consciousness of the brevity of your own life, makes every moment -- every moment -- all the more precious.

The nearness of death marvelously focusses the mind. At every funeral service, we say in the call to worship: "We gather here as God's people, conscious of others who have died and of the frailty of our own existence on earth." But that doesn't make us sad. We are reminded instead with such clarity what it is that does make a life meaningful and memorable and worthwhile. It would be good for us not to forget that lesson, not to go home from the funeral and once more do all we can to complicate our lives!

It is better to have wise people reprimand you than to have stupid people sing your praises.

Of course it is.

When a fool laughs, it is like thorns crackling in a fire.

There is laughter, and then there is laughter. There is the hollow, mocking, crackling laughter of a person who really doesn't get it, who really doesn't take the gravity of another's life or his own seriously enough. And then there is the deep and healing laughter of a person who knows, who knows the extraordinary import of each and every life, but knows enough not to take herself too seriously, because it is all, we are all, in God's hands. It is the deep and healing laughter of a loosened grip. It is the freeing laughter of letting go.

It is foolish to harbor a grudge.

Think of all the energy it takes to harbor a grudge, to hold on to a hurt. Think of how you are complicating your life unnecessarily. It is exhausting and debilitating and life-sapping, and for what? Who gains from your grudge? Not you. Who loses? Both you and the one you begrudge.

Never ask, "Oh, why were things so much better in the old days?" It's not an intelligent question.

It is a terrible burden, a most unhappy complication, to disparage the only life you do have for the sake of what exists only in memory, only in imagination. The old days may have been good. If so, remember them, celebrate them, give God thanks for them. But better? To wonder why the old days were better is to extinguish all curiosity and attention and investment and appreciation and affection -- and gratitude -- for the one moment of your life you have: this one.

God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated. So how can you achieve a plain and simple life?

You have it! You already have it! God made you plain and simple. You don't need to achieve it or go looking for it or figure out how to do it. That would just be another way of making yourself more complicated.

God made you plain and simple. So reorder your priorities, or, even better, let go of some of them. Let go of most of them. Live in the moment. And remember your place in the world. Because you have a place: this place, this time, these people, this life, this God.