

Work for What Matters

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Vanity of all vanities.

That's how the book of Ecclesiastes begins. One commentator says, "Ecclesiastes has always had its fans among the original thinkers of the Jewish and Christian communities, those who are skeptics and people with a dark vision of reality."

It's also one of my favorite books of the Bible, so, there's that.

Seriously, I love it because I imagine the writer to be quite the character. You can read Ecclesiastes in a way that takes the writer very seriously, meaning you can read it thinking the writer literally means everything he says – that he is the most cynical person who's ever lived. But I think another, maybe better way, of reading Ecclesiastes, is to imagine the writer saying these things a little tongue in cheek with sort of a smirk.

So think of it like this. Imagine there is a large conference of people from a wide range of fields and disciplines. They are all really, really excited to be there and they all think that whatever it is they do is the single most important thing anyone could ever do. And in the midst of this gathering, the philosopher of Ecclesiastes is walking around taking it all in.

He walks by two young lawyers talking about how many billable hours they work and how they're on track to make partner. He smirks and says, "Meaningless. What you're doing is meaningless."

He comes to people working startups or in venture capital who are so excited about their new project, so excited about how much money they might make and he says, "Vanity of vanities."

He comes to the table where the philosophers and theologians are hanging out and debating the most existential questions humans have, each of them so proud of their insight, and he says, "Worthless."

He comes to the place where pastors and church leaders are discussing the latest church growth strategy and he says, "Y'all are the absolute worst."

None of us escape his critique.

Finally, someone has had enough and shouts at the philosopher, "Ok wise guy, since you know so much, why don't you tell us. If everything we do is meaningless, then tell us what we should do."

He looks around the room, takes everyone in, and says, "You know what your problem is...you take yourselves way too seriously. You think life is about your work, or about making money, or

about what people think of you. But guess what, you're all going to die one day. And then, what's going to come of all you worked for. All those hours you spent, making money, building your company, gaining power and prestige, none of that will matter then. In the big scheme of things we all have only a few short years before we become rotting compost. Is that how you really want to spend that time? Is this what you think will make those few short years mean something? When all is said and done, those things don't matter. Here's what matters:

Friendship

Loving Relationship

Finding pleasure in the seemingly mundane, ordinary things of life.

"Go, eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has long ago approved what you do. ⁸ Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. ⁹ Enjoy life with the people you love all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun,^[4] because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun." – Ecclesiastes 9: 7-9

A few hundred years after the writer of Ecclesiastes shared his philosophy of life and work, Jesus of Nazareth came along. He was certainly quite different in character than the philosopher of Ecclesiastes, but his teaching we read today echoes similar themes. He told the story of a rich man who had everything he could possibly need and then some. This man's land was producing such an abundant harvest that his barns were not big enough to store all of it, so he decided that he would tear down his old barns and build bigger ones. The story ends with God calling the man, "a fool," saying that this very night, the man will die and then what will be the point of these new barns.

Like the writer of Ecclesiastes, in this story, Jesus raises the question about what is the point of life by asking his hearers to contemplate death. When all is said and done, when our life comes to an end, what will have made our life mean something? Jesus is pretty explicit about where we shouldn't find meaning – building newer, bigger barns is not it.

I think Jesus would agree with the writer of Ecclesiastes that what gives life meaning are things like friendship, loving relationship, and enjoying the daily pleasures of life. But he adds one more, and I would say crucial, thing. For Jesus, what truly makes a life well-lived and meaningful is when we use what we have – our time, our skills, our resources – to help others, especially those who are in need.

In another story, Jesus told a rich young man to give up all his possessions and give the money to the poor. He taught that in God's kingdom, the poor come first and the rich last. He told us that he most identifies with the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the prisoner and that whenever we serve those whom the world considers "least," we are serving him. Over and over again, Jesus taught that we find life when we give what we have away. He taught that if we are to be

his followers, we must care for the poor – it's not negotiable. He taught that life is meant to be lived in service to others and the great paradox of that kind of life is that when we give of ourselves, that's when we truly find life, joy, and fulfillment.

Imagine what would have happened in the story that Jesus told if the rich man had decided to use his wealth to serve others. What if he had looked at his harvest and instead of saying, "I need bigger barns so I can keep all this for myself," what if he had said, "Wow! I have more food than I could ever use. I can't even store all this food. So who can I share it with? How can I make someone else's life better with all that I have?"

If he had done that, my guess is that God would not have called him "a fool." The man would have discovered that the point of life is not to store up more and more for himself, but rather to live in such a way that other people are better off because of you.

About a 1000 years ago, there lived a very wealthy man named Giovanni who really lived the high life. He wore the finest clothes. He had the best seats at all of the major entertainment venues of the day. And none of it was enough. He kept buying more clothes, buying more pleasure, accumulating more for himself.

When he was still a young man, Giovanni had a very serious illness that made him, probably for the first time, contemplate death and, in so doing, to take an honest look at his life. What was his purpose? Whenever the time would come for him to die, what impact would his life have? Had anything he had done mattered in the big scheme of things?

He came to the same conclusion as the writer of Ecclesiastes...his life as he had lived it up to that point was meaningfulness. It was vanity. Or to use the language Jesus used in his story, he had been a fool.

So what did he do? He gave away everything he had....all of it, he gave to the poor and lived the rest of his days praying in monasteries, begging on the street, and sharing whatever he had with those who were most in need.

My guess is you've never heard of Giovanni...at least not by that name. But once he discovered that meaning and purpose is found when we give of ourselves rather than seeking more and more, he took on a new name. Giovanni is St. Francis of Assisi, and I'm guessing you have heard of him. He's perhaps the most selfless saint in the history of Christianity and one of the great gifts that he left us is the Prayer of St. Francis:

"Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;

And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

To that prayer, even the philosopher of Ecclesiastes might have to say “Amen.”