

*One Hand Full of Quiet*  
Ecclesiastes 3: 9-13; 4: 6; 5: 18-19  
I Timothy 4: 4-5

Susanna Knox Griefen  
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Saugatuck Congregational Church

Ecclesiastes has been called the strangest book in the Bible. There have been many through the centuries who think it doesn't belong in the Bible; it is so at odds with so much of scripture. And the people who put together the common lectionary seem to agree. Only the familiar passage: *To everything there is a season, and a time for every propose...* is included in the common lectionary, for New Year's Day, not a Sunday, and a few other verses are alternates. But the main thrust and argument of Ecclesiastes is entirely left out of our assigned readings, and I decided today was the day to look at it. We know nothing of the author, referred to in the text as Qohelet, or Koheleth, a word found nowhere except in this book, so we can only guess what it means. It comes from the verb "to assemble" so it means an assembler; sometimes taken to mean preacher, one who assembles a congregation; or teacher, one who gathers a class.

*What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. God has made everything suitable for its time; moreover God has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil... Better is a handful with quiet than two hands full with toil, and a chasing after wind... This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom God enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God.*

I Timothy 4: 4-5

*Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer. Amen.*

The introduction to Ecclesiastes in the New Interpreters' Bible says, "Ecclesiastes has always had its fans among the original thinkers of Jewish and Christian communities: skeptics, people with a dark vision of reality, recovering alcoholics." (New Interpreters' Bible, V, p.267)

Qohelet, the author, questions everything. He challenges unexamined assumptions. He makes a keen effort to “make sense of life based on observation and practical experience.” (New Interpreters’ Bible, V, p. 274) He speaks in a voice like Job’s: rigorous, disturbing, mistrustful of old truths. And it’s that contrariness that is his gift to us. Ecclesiastes is a counterpoint to conventional wisdom and established religiosity. He tries every way he knows to explore truth, and finally comes to a set of core conclusions contained in our texts for today.

First: God is utterly sovereign. *God has made everything suitable for its time. There is a time for every purpose under heaven.* That’s the good news. But the bad news is: there is no way for us to know what the final plan and purpose of God is! We “*cannot find out what God has done.*”

God has placed in our minds a sense of past and future, the NRSV says. It’s a hard text to translate--a sense of forever, it might say, a sense of the unknowable. God has set eternity in our minds, God has placed in our minds an enigma, says the Anchor Bible. God has given us a sense that there is more to life than meets the eye. We have an intuitive sense that our grasp is small and truth is infinite; that life is significant, and God is real, but beyond understanding. God has placed an enigma in our minds. We long to know God, and we feel God has a will and plan for us, but we can’t know what it is with clarity and certainty. It matters that we do the will of God; but we can’t pin it down, Qohelet reminds us. We need to be humble. God has made everything suitable in its time, but we don’t know with certainty what that time is.

Life is short, Qohelet reminds his readers again and again. Vanity of vanities, not in the sense of meaningless, but fleeting, vapor of vapors, breath of a breath, is a better translation. Life is short; and little is certain. What are we to do?

And here’s this wonderful mandate: we are to be happy and enjoy ourselves!

One Sunday early in my ministry, I preached a baccalaureate service for our graduating seniors. I preached the kind of earnest sermon you would expect: life sets before you a great array of choices, your decisions will determine your life; you will never grow up into the persons you are meant to be unless you are intentional about your lives.

When I got home my husband said, “I kept waiting for you to tell them to have fun!” I said, “I did. I talked about the pleasure of work well done, about choosing what mattered for a joyful life.” “No, Susie,” he said, fun, just fun. You never told them it was important to have a good time!” And I hadn’t. I should have. But it never crossed my mind. I never said *God has made everything beautiful in its time. I know there is nothing better for people to do than to be happy and to enjoy themselves as long as they live.* I didn’t tell them that Jesus told us he came that we *might have life, and have it abundantly*; that his will was that *his joy might be in us, that our joy might be full.* I am too good, we are too good; our children are too good, at being earnest and effortful and dutiful and burdened. We aren’t good enough at joy. We need this word from Ecclesiastes: God’s will for us is joy. God has given to us, to all, the possibility of happiness and life ought to be enjoyed.

I was going to say, “We don’t take that seriously enough!” We don’t take life joyfully enough. We need this word. *All to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom God enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil— this is the gift of God.*

It’s God gift that we should all take pleasure in our toil, and part of the way to do that, Qohelet tells us, is to have one handful with quiet, instead of both hands full with toil and striving after the wind.

Now, I am really grateful that this verse doesn’t say, better is two hands full of quiet. I’m not a contemplative by nature, God made me a worker, for which I’m grateful. But God didn’t make me frantic. I do that myself when I forget that God didn’t make me only a worker. All work and no play may have made Jack a dull boy, but it makes me cranky, and ungrateful, and blind to the beauty of life.

About half-way through my ministry, I was going to Israel for a two-week trip. I’d been there for a three month Sabbatical before, but was headed back, wanting to do everything I’d missed, and to climb in the high Sinai range. I’d just gotten through the Holy Week crush and it seemed every committee meeting I went to produced another long list of thing to do. The week before I left I was driven, and desperate to get things done. Luckily, I had spiritual direction with Hal Harrison, whom some of you know; he started his long ministry in CT. He drove up to my house at mid-week and when he got there, I said, “I’m so frazzled, I don’t know how I’ll get everything done!”

Gentle soul that he was, having just driven twenty minutes to see me, he said, “Maybe you’re too busy for spiritual direction.” I grabbed his arm and said, “No, no. I’m so busy I’ll go nuts without it.” So we sat on the deck of my quiet house in the woods, and chatted a little as we usually did, settling into sacred space; and then we were silent together, a long silence—10 minutes, 20 minutes; time to really be quiet and listen.

It was a fairly new house for Michael and me. We’d designed and built it on a hill, in a sugar bush, overlooking the Connecticut River Valley. Except that you couldn’t see much at first because the neighbor we had bought the land from had just not been able to bring himself to cut a living tree- they all had a right to life for him. So they grew close together, with long thin trunks and narrow crowns and crowded roots. Little by little Michael was clearing out some trees so that others would have room to grow and thrive, to let down their branches and take the more natural shape they’d be when they didn’t have to compete for the light; to make room for strong roots.

I looked over the work that had been done, and thought of the planning and care that was going into what to take and what to leave: deciding which trees were healthy, which had crowns we could see under, which blocked a view we wanted. It was a slow and careful process. And in the silence, I thought what a great metaphor for life that was. If everything is allowed to grow and take time and energy and space, all of life is crowded and strained.

Sitting at the table before Hal arrived, I had been trying to plan how to get slides of all the places anyone might want to see, how to be sure I made a list of every significant Biblical event, how to work the camera. I got so resentful of the impossible task, I dreaded my trip. In the silence I thought, “Well, that’s terrific, if anyone can spend two weeks and \$2000 and ruin it by working it to death, you’re the one!” And I thought of this text, *Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and striving.*

To take pleasure in our toil, which is God’s gift to us, we need to spend some time not working. We need a hand full of quiet, time to be passive, to let God lead us. It means that we are called to sometimes take a real vacation, which comes from the word to make vacant, to allow empty space; not to fill our vacations as full of duty and deadlines as our jobs.

Jim Wallis, of Sojourners Magazine, wrote that we moderns have misunderstood the Gospel— “Jesus didn’t come to take our ordinary lives and improve them- to make us a little better at what we were already doing!

Jesus Christ came into the world to change life, to change us!” Realizing that promise, receiving that possibility, that we can be changed, not just adjusted, takes time, it takes quiet. We can’t do it for ourselves. And God can’t do it if both hands are full of toil and striving.

This summer, spend less time on what you need to do, to have space to discover who you are called to be. Be happy and enjoy life. It’s God’s gift to you. It’s God’s will for you. Receive it with thanksgiving. Amen.

p.s.

At the end of the sermon on the beach, John said, “You still didn’t tell them to have fun!” Have fun! Be joyful. It’s God’s will for you.