



Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 11, 2021

* *Please stand if you are able*

Prelude: "Dona Nobis Pacem"

David W. Moore

Gathering

WELCOME & LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE

Acolyte: May the Holy Spirit unite us in worship, point us toward Jesus Christ, and inspire us to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God. Come, let us worship God.

* CALL TO WORSHIP

Liturgist: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

All: For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

Liturgist: In love he predestined us for adoption as sons and daughters through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace,

All: which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

Ephesians 1:3-6

All Singing: 687 "Father, Long Before Creation"

GOD'S GREETING

GOD'S PEOPLE GREETING ONE ANOTHER

All Singing: “Behold Bless the Lord”

Psalm 134

**Behold bless the Lord, all children of the Lord,
Who stand by night in the house of the Lord.**

**Lift up (lift up) your hands (your hands)
In the sanctuary (in the sanctuary)
And bless the Lord.**

**May the Lord bless you from Zion,
He who made heaven and earth.**

Children ages 4–7 may come forward for a blessing before they leave for “Children in Worship.”

CHILDREN’S BLESSING

Children: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: And also, with you.

Reconciliation

Liturgist: In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us.

Silent Confession and Reflection

Instrumental: “Amazing Grace”

Liturgist: With all wisdom and understanding he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

All: In him we were also chosen, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

Liturgist: And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory.
Ephesians 1:7-14

*** All Singing: 691 “Amazing Grace”**

Liturgist: Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. In your anger do not sin; do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

All: Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

Liturgist: Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

All: Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Liturgist: Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

Proclamation

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

All Singing: 762 “Ancient Words”

Scripture: Mark 6:14-29

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Sermon: “What shall I ask for?”

* **All Singing: 417 “Within Our Darkest Night”**
Soloist singing through once; Congregation joining to repeat

Dedication

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Sending

BENEDICTION

Minister: Show us your unfailing love, Lord, and grant us your salvation.

All: You, Lord, promise peace to your people, your faithful servants.

Minister: Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in the land.

All: Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.

Minister: The Lord will indeed give what is good. Go in peace.

Psalm 85:7-12 adapted

* **All Singing: 926 “God of Grace and God of Glory”**
Singing verses 1, 3, and 4

Postlude: “Now With Joyful Exaltation Let Us Sing to God Our Praise” arr. Rick Parks

Worship Leaders

Pianist / Vocalist: Erin Pacheco
Organist / Flutist: Lynn Hollender
Cellist: Adeline Larsen
Vocalists: Marjie Coleman
Lori Evenhouse
Russ Hollender
Aron Reppmann
Minister: Roger Nelson

Acolyte: Trinity Simpson
Liturgist: Ev Bussema
Prayer: Scott DuBois

Ecclesiastes 12: Aging Gracefully
Hope CRC July 2021

I remember a call from my grandfather, a resident of a retirement home at that time. He had just caused a minor scandal in the home by proposing marriage to a fellow resident. He proposed in an unusually romantic way: he invited her into his apartment for bran muffins. Over health food across his little kitchen table, he reached for her hands and asked for them and more in marriage. And she said “yes,” and they were incredibly happy.

It wasn't long before this newlywed was in the hospital at age 85, where he learned that something was happening inside of him which threatened his life. For the third time in his long life, he had to look the prospect of death squarely in the face.

One day in the hospital as we read Psalms together and talked about life and Jesus, I noticed something in him. He understood what it meant to grow old as a Christian. This life-threatening development wasn't going to slow him down. He wasn't going to become cautious and reclusive, and he wouldn't give in to self-pity. I saw that my grandfather knew what it meant to age without allowing the thought or reality of aging and disease to devastate his spirit. My grandfather was someone who matured with age—like fine wine.

You see, he not only aged well, or aged graciously, as some describe it. He aged **gracefully**, full of the grace of God to be found in Jesus Christ.

Many would say that growing old is a real pain. The body doesn't look the same or work the same. You know the local pharmacist on a first-name basis. Fiber no longer has to do with what your clothes are made of. You read a restaurant menu not for how things might taste but for how well they will digest.

Even the passage we're listening to gives the impression that growing old can be a real pain. We seem to get a very skeptical, even cynical view of what happens to men and women as they grow older. The picture painted by the preacher in Ecclesiastes is cynical and skeptical because it seems to be a picture of life lived in emptiness, futility, and vanity, without meaning. Aging—growing older—is a life of desperation, this passage warns us.

Notice what the Preacher in Ecclesiastes compares aging to in some very vivid, poetic images.

First, he calls growing older the evil days or the days of trouble. And his first description is to compare aging to winter, the last season. In verse 2 he describes a Palestinian winter, and it's not the sort of thing you'll find on a travel brochure.

Next, he describes the collapse of a house, a decaying house. And the bottom line is that this old house ain't what it used to be. Many commentators see in this poetic imagery

references to things like shaky legs and missing teeth and cataracts and deafness and increasing fear.

The blossoming almond tree of verse 5 creates the picture of the gray and white hairs that cover the head as white flowers cover the almond tree. The grasshopper has lost his kick—it seems to drag itself along.

And most devastating of all—desire is gone. Desire for work, for food, for drink, for love. The evil days, the days of trouble, have come.

All that is left is to face the certainty of death. The silver cord will break, you know: the cord that holds the lamp just may snap. And if that's not how the end comes, maybe the bowl holding the lamp oil will break. You can't predict the end, but the light will go out. You can't even go to the well for water—both the pitcher and the means to draw water are broken.

If you want a depressing view of growing old, look at these images from Ecclesiastes. He makes it sound so bleak. He reminds us of the dust of Genesis.

Would he have said the same things today, surrounded as we are with the wonders of medicine which give us dentures, cataract and laser surgery, hearing aids, and multi-vitamins? Would the picture be so bleak if he could see one of those life-restoring oatmeal commercials? Would he have written about white-topped almond trees and gray hair if he knew about Grecian Formula or Lady Clairol? And then there's Oil of Olay and, lest we forget, Viagra!

Without doubt, he would have. He writes about the universal human experience. In fact, his words might have been even stronger today, given the fact that our culture is so thoroughly youth-oriented. Advertisers go for the youth market. Movies are made with adolescent dollars in mind. Spiderman still has teenage angst. Churches hire youth pastors.

Maybe you noticed that this is where the Preacher of Ecclesiastes directs his words: to the young. Right at youth. He speaks to the young not just about growing old, but how devastating it is to grow old without God. He wants the young to hear his message, and his message throughout this strange and obscure book of Scripture is about the problems and mysteries of life.

Just after the Civil War when I was in college people discussed a popular song about life recorded by Peggy Lee. It was called, "Is That All There Is?" Some said it was a distorted and pessimistic view of life. Others liked it and felt that it gave an accurate portrayal of the way things really were.

Each verse of the song told of her repeated disappointments in life as she grew up, from the childlike depression after the thrill of her first circus, to the adult letdown of a lost

love affair. After each verse, the chorus repeated a theme that is found in Ecclesiastes. It went like this:

Is that all there is?
 Is that all there is?
 If that's all there is my friend, then let's keep dancing!
 Let's break out the booze and have a ball,
 If that's all there is.

I mention this to point out that the Preacher in Ecclesiastes was asking the very same question. He begins his writing with these words:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!
 Says the Teacher.
 “Utterly meaningless!
 Everything is meaningless.”
 What does man gain from all his labor
 At which he toils under the sun.

He's saying this: what's the worth of what I do? All seems to be empty, without meaning. You chase and chase after this or that; you grow old and weak and die. Is that all there is to life?

You see, this book of Ecclesiastes is a spiritual pilgrimage, a journey with this conclusion, one we read together. It went like this:

“Now all has been heard;
 here is the conclusion of the matter:
 Fear God and keep his commandments,
 For this is the whole duty of man.
 For God will bring every deed into judgment,
 Including every hidden thing,
 Whether it is good or evil.”

So, we have a book which begins by asking, “Is that all there is?” and ends by saying “All there is is the fear of God and the keeping of his commandments.” Now that's quite a conclusion to come to, especially when you consider the experiences that led to it.

Imagine someone standing on a high roof in the middle of a busy town. She has a camera and spends time taking pictures of life in that town. She snaps pictures of things that happen and draws some conclusions about them. There may be a picture of love or laughter or work or play; maybe birth or death. And then she comments on the activities just photographed.

Snapshot comments on life run something like this throughout Ecclesiastes: Life, especially as humans live it without God, is futile, bleak, purposeless, and empty. Nature

and history go round in circles. There is nothing new under the sun. Add up the profit and loss of human life and you are better off dead. Life can be unfair, work pointless, and pleasures fail to satisfy. Good clean living is rendered futile by death. Ecclesiastes seems to say, “Be realistic. If life without God is the complete story, then see it for what it is. Don’t pretend and make it look better somehow. Don’t be naïve. You know from experience that this sounds like the truth.”

The preacher in Ecclesiastes tried many ways to find the meaning of life. He discovered that, by themselves, the realities of evil and death couldn’t explain life. He failed to find it in human wisdom, especially his own. Nor could he find it in pleasure or wealth, idleness or ambition.

In fact, nothing by itself could solve the riddle of life and he was repeatedly led to say that all was empty, that is, everything by itself was impermanent and unsubstantial—like wind. You can’t put your finger on it.

He couldn’t solve the riddle of life by anything under the sun until, as he tells it, until he considered life in the light of eternity. And this is the difference between the search for meaning in Ecclesiastes and Peggy Lee’s song.

The song looked for the answer to life’s riddle within life itself, and ended in frustration. The song and Ecclesiastes expose life for what it is. Both asked, “Is that all there is?” but only one can say, “No, there’s more to life than life itself.”

And this, the preacher tells us, is all there is:

“...the whole duty of man is the fear of God and the keeping of his commandments.”

Fear God. Stand in awe of God as the only source of true wisdom, which points us to the Creator and reminds us that we are his creatures. We know our place and his in the scheme of things. If we don’t, we end up thinking more highly of ourselves, our wisdom, and what we judge to be our control of the universe, and we worship something other than God.

Keep His Commandments. Certainly not fashionable in any age of unbridled freedom. And there are many who look at what they think is Christianity and say, “Forget it, if all it is is keeping some rules.”

Well, rule keeping in and by itself can be oppressive and unattractive. Legalism is a real killer of grace. That’s why Ecclesiastes links the fear of God with keeping God’s commandments. The difference between rigid rule keeping and Christian obedience lies in the area of relationships.

If I break an income tax law—this is entirely hypothetical you understand—I probably wouldn’t feel that I’ve personally insulted the IRS agent, and he or she probably wouldn’t

feel that way either, as they hauled me off to jail. There's no personal relationship between the two of us that can be strained or broken.

The Bible says that God's law is based on a covenant relationship of grace, which he sets up with his people. His rules, his commandments, reflect his grace and loving character. Because his people belong to him through his grace, they desire obedience because it deepens the relationship and enables us to extend that grace to our neighbors.

Obedience is a love relationship, which grows out of the fear of God and recognizes that God's grace in Jesus Christ gives us the freedom to extend grace toward others. And that's a vastly different way to live, no matter your age.

What does Ecclesiastes say to young and old alike? What guidance is there for us as we take our own snapshots of life: unemployment, friendships, bad report cards, vacations, births, deaths, growing older?

We've received a strong warning not to look for the meaning of life within life itself. It is our obedient, thankful relationship with the Creator through Jesus Christ that gives life meaning. The search for meaning within life itself is called secularism, and Ecclesiastes exposes this worldly wisdom as despair, gift-wrapped.

The effort to find answers to life within life itself is weak because it fails to take account of two realities that are most significant: evil and death. The world's wisdom either sugar coats these two uglies with the unfounded hope that we can conquer them or cites them as the chief reason to view the world and everything in it as absurd, a world gone crazy.

Christianity takes these two ugly realities into account, but exposes them for what they are, and offers hope based on something that happened in history. Christianity says quite frankly that evil and death are powerful brokers of brokenness—they can really make life a misery—unless one stands with Jesus Christ who rendered them powerless on the cross and in his resurrection.

Christianity means business and looks at life seriously, realistically. That's the message of Ecclesiastes: take an honest look at life and ask what holds it together. The preacher says that God fits the pieces of our jigsaw puzzle life together when we are his. If we don't worship him, we end up worshipping something in creation, and that's death, vanity, despair, and emptiness.

"Remember also your creator in the days of your youth," chapter 12 begins. We also need to hear this today, whatever our age.

For those who are young, this is the time of life when you're starting to sort things out, including yourself and your priorities. You're becoming more aware of your personality, you're beginning to assume more responsibilities, and you're making important decisions.

You've thought about the basic questions of life, or maybe it's time to start. Questions like:

What do I live for?
 What would I die for?
 What do I stand for?
 What am I made of?

Questions of origin and calling and destiny. The big picture questions which never go away.

Questions like these are answered best when you're able to answer the biggest question of all—**to whom do I belong?** And in that knowledge the rest of life begins to fall into place. We have an answer to that question when we see it from the perspective of Jesus Christ who says: "Believe on me, and you will have abundant life. Come to me, and you'll know my Father in Heaven. Learn of me and learn of life. See things and yourself from my Father's point of view and through the vision my Lordship provides. Love your neighbor with the grace you've received."

Remembering your Creator in the days of your youth is an invitation to pleasure and fullness, it's an offer to enjoy. It's the encouragement to come party with God.

Our culture constantly talks about aging **graciously**, and it has everything to do with physical externals: how we can grow old without looking it or grow old minimizing it or grow old by disguising it. You know. Botox and B-12; a nip, a tuck, a liposuck.

God's Word consistently talks about aging **gracefully**, and it has everything to do with the spirit: a grace-filled relationship with the Creator that guides and directs each day of life.

Conventional wisdom says that those who have difficulty with aging or retirement are those who never really understood what life was about at a younger age. That conventional wisdom sounds very much like the Biblical wisdom to be found in this passage from Biblical wisdom literature: remember your Creator in the days of your youth or face evil days apart from him.

My 85 year-young grandfather told me in his hospital room that the reason he wouldn't slow down was that he always lived each day in the fear of the Lord, each day as a gift from his Creator, each day as a walk in the Kingdom with the gift of grace in Christ.

I think he must have read Ecclesiastes. I know that he remembered his Creator in the days of his youth.

The invitation to remember your Creator is offered today, whatever your age. Aging gracefully, you see, may start when you're young. But it's never too late.
 Amen