

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

Don't Speculate, Enjoy Life (Even Work)
Ecclesiastes 9:7-11; 2:24-26

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Here's the story: good actions produce good consequences; evil actions produce evil consequence. Or alternatively, appropriate behavior yields prosperity; whereas inappropriate behavior results in suffering. This formulaic explanation for success and failure occurs at various places in the Bible.

As the fundamental belief of the Hebrew wisdom literature, this principle is frequently cited in the book of Proverbs. Consider the following proverbs: "The wicked earn no real gain, but those who sow righteousness get a true reward (Proverbs 11:18)." Or again: "Be assured, the wicked will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will escape (Proverbs 11:21)." The Hebrew wisdom sages affirmed this principle because they believed it resulted from a divinely established order to life. Another proverb states this belief: "The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked (Proverbs 10:3)." Accordingly the wise person acts within the established order of life, and the fool crosses the line between order and disorder. A proverbial wisdom sage

puts it this way: "Doing wrong is like sport to a fool, wise conduct is pleasure to a person of understanding (Proverbs 10:23)." Or again: "The wise are cautious and turn away from evil, but the fool throws off restraint and is careless (Proverbs 14:16)."

A variation of this formula argues that hard work yields success but laziness results in failure. The following proverbs express it this way: "A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich (Proverbs 10:4)." Or: "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior (Proverbs 6:10-11)."

Do you believe this formula for success works? We are taught it does--in secular as well as sacred literature and culture. And it does work, most of the time. Ambitious, hard-working people are often rewarded with success; slackers are not. Usually, typically this correlation between hard work, righteousness, and success works; it works, except when it does not. In this "when it does not" we have the counter-story.

The author of another wisdom book, Ecclesiastes, is all too aware that this equation for success and failure doesn't always work. The wisdom sage of Ecclesiastes expresses the counter-story like this: "Again I saw that under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to

the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time disaster (Ecclesiastes 9:11-12)."

Though aware of the confessing story in which God grants favor to the righteous and failure to the wicked, experience nonetheless teaches Ecclesiastes not to trust this normative story. Instead this ancient wisdom sage acknowledges a different story, a counter-story in which the righteous sufferer and the wicked prosper. Ecclesiastes notes: "Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well (Ecclesiastes 3:16)."

Ecclesiastes is not alone in his rejection of the normative story. Even Jesus doesn't believe it. There is a story in the gospel of John in which Jesus is asked about a blind man: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Soundly rejecting the confessing story that the man's blindness must have resulted from either his own sins or those of his parents, Jesus unequivocally says: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." Jesus then spits on the ground, rubs the muddy mixture on the blind man's eyes, and restores his sight.

For those of you who are still concerned about Mark's counter-story in which it takes Jesus two tries to heal the blind man, notice that Jesus seems to have perfected his healing

technique in the gospel of John for here Jesus is successful on the first attempt. Still we can't escape counter-story.

Instead of being the counter-story in John, Jesus rejects the dominant story and invokes the counter-story: The innocent do suffer.

No less an esteemed figure than Martin Luther is also attracted by the realism of Ecclesiastes' counter-story. He writes: "This book, which on many counts deserves to be in everyone's hands and to be familiar to everyone . . . has until now been deprived of its reputation and dignity and has lain in miserable neglect so that today we have neither the use nor the benefit from it that we should."

Anyone keeping score? Note that for this counter-story sermon topic, I have two heavy hitters on my side, two influential theologians who support the counter-story--Jesus and Martin Luther.

Story and counter-story: without too much difficulty we can all probably think of poignant examples from our own lives. Let me just suggest one from the life and reflections of a public figure: presidential candidate John Edwards. In a recent magazine article Edwards states that he went through life "thinking that if you work hard and you do what's right, things will work out." This is a perfect expression of what we have all been told is the dominant, confessing story. Then his 16-

year-old son was tragically killed in a car accident and his wife was diagnosed with cancer. On the basis of these experiences he now believes that "the idea that we have control is a fantasy. You just have to do the best you can and whatever happens, happens." This too is a perfect expression of the experiential counter-story.

How do we explain this situation in which we are taught to believe and trust in the story but experience teaches us that life is filled with way too many examples of the counter-story? Ecclesiastes recognizes and honestly acknowledges that there is no consistently satisfactory or logical answer to this question. In fact, a frequent refrain in the book is "Who knows?" Who knows what the future will bring? Who knows what God is doing? Who knows how humans should live their lives? Ecclesiastes writes: "No one knows what is to happen, and who can tell anyone what the future holds (Ecclesiastes 10:14)?" Or again: "Who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life (Ecclesiastes 6:12)?"

Yet the wisdom sage of Ecclesiastes affirms that there is an order to life. The litany we just recited suggests that there is an appropriate time for everything. The problem is that human beings cannot figure out or understand what that order is. Ecclesiastes argues that trying to figure out the order to life, trying to figure out what God has done in the

past, is doing now, and will do in the future, trying to figure out what is good for humans to do is vanity.

The Hebrew word which is typically translated as "vanity" literally means "wind" or "breath." Trying to understand the order of life is like chasing the wind; trying to figure out the meaning to life is like attempting to grab hold of breath. It can't be done. Ecclesiastes is emphatic about the futility of all attempts to understand God's agenda and the uselessness of trying to figure out the meaning of life. He rejects all such speculation. Speculation about what God is doing or will do, speculation regarding why things happen as they do is futile. There are no answers. Speculation is just that: speculation. It is like wind or breath: evasive in form and elusive in content. And as such, it is more or less a waste of time.

Inexplicable counter-story replaces the hoped-for, predictable story in the thought of Ecclesiastes. Unlike most theologians and philosophers, Ecclesiastes refuses to speculate on the reasons why this is the case. Yet Ecclesiastes does not passively submit to defeat and abandon the quest for a meaningful life. Instead Ecclesiastes tenaciously addresses the question familiar to those of us involved in capstone courses: How then shall we live?

Instead of speculating about the unknowns and unknowables of life, Ecclesiastes deals only with what he knows for sure.

This ancient wisdom sage focuses only on what he knows for certain to be the God-given gifts of life, that is, only on what he can perceive with his senses, namely that which he can touch, taste, feel, and smell. On this basis alone Ecclesiastes offers advice on how to live life when one cannot know or understand or count on an order to life. The wisdom sage of Ecclesiastes repeatedly offers such advice as the following: "There's nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil (Ecclesiastes 2:24)." Or again: "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life (Ecclesiastes 9:7-9)."

In essence Ecclesiastes advice is don't speculate, enjoy life. Enjoy those immediate experiences of life. Enjoy eating and drinking, enjoy relationships with others, even, maybe especially, enjoy your work.

Ecclesiastes is confident in offering this advice because he considers the enjoyment of life a gift from God. In commending the enjoyment of those immediate experiences of life, this ancient sage states: "This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from God who can eat or who can have enjoyment (Ecclesiastes 2:25)?" Addressing those who enjoy life, the sage

further notes "God has long ago approved what you do (Ecclesiastes 9:7)."

Let's be clear about this advise. Ecclesiastes is not endorsing a self-indulgence lifestyle. To the contrary Ecclesiastes has explored such self-indulgent lifestyles and found them empty of meaning, as meaningless as speculations about God's agenda and explanations for why things happen as they do or don't. Instead the wisdom favored by Ecclesiastes suggests that we enjoy the process of life, not the product. Enjoy those immediate experiences of life instead of waiting until some future time when our dreams will be fulfilled. For example, enjoy the process of getting a college education. Don't wait to enjoy life until you graduate and get that \$200,000 a year job. We can all hope that such time may come; but as Ecclesiastes is well aware, it may not.

Rather than focus our energies on an unknown and uncertain future, Ecclesiastes encourages us to invest in the experiences of life which are immediately available to us. Food and drink are immediately available to us in the Commons and in the numerous restaurants and grocery stores around Sioux Falls. The campus is filled with people. Relationships are immediately available to us. And we all know that college life is filled with more than enough work. We are privileged to have available

to us food and drink, relationships, and work. Ecclesiastes' advice: enjoy them. They are gifts from God.

Amen, for now. I say Amen, for now, because once again I would like to continue the discussion of confessing, counter-stories by inviting you to a community discussion on Thursday at 10 o'clock in the 3 in 1 room in the Commons Building. I would like to hear your ideas about Ecclesiastes' counter-story. You and anyone else you know is welcome. Again treats will be available. Come and enjoy the immediate experiences of these treats and of the conversation which will follow. So until then: Amen, for now.

MORNING WORSHIP

Monday, October 15

Prelude

Meditation on "Kingsfold"

Roberta Bitgood

Welcome

Invocation

Litany

LEADER: For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

Right Side (R): a time to be born,

Left Side (L): and a time to die;

R: a time to plant,

L: and a time to pluck up what is planted;

R: a time to kill,

L: and a time to heal;

R: a time to break down,

L: and a time to build up;

R: a time to weep,

L: and a time to laugh;

R: a time to mourn,

L: and a time to dance;

R: a time to throw away stones,

L: and a time to gather stones together;

R: a time to embrace,

L: and a time to refrain from embracing;

R: a time to seek,

L: and a time to lose;

R: a time to keep,

L: and a time to throw away;

R: a time to tear,

L: and a time to sew;

R: a time to keep silence,

L: and a time to speak;

R: a time to love,

L: and a time to hate;

R: a time for war,

L: and a time for peace.

LEADER: God has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, God has put a sense of past and future into peoples' minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

