

“Life’s Solemn Impartialities”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

April 18, 2010

**Texts: “Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil.” (Ecclesiastes 9:2)
“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)**

This morning I want to set against each other two verses of Scripture that offer two very different ways of looking at human existence.

The first is from the Book of Ecclesiastes: “All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good and to the evil; to the clean and to the unclean; to the one that sacrifices and to the one that does not sacrifice. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one event unto all” (Ecclesiastes 9:2ff.).

That is from Ecclesiastes.

The second is from Paul’s letter to the church at Rome. “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8: 28).

I.

As for the Book of Ecclesiastes, it poses one of the most difficult problems of interpretation in all of Scripture. There is a theme that is set out in Ecclesiastes in the opening verse: “Vanity of Vanity, says the Preacher, All is Vanity. All is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:1).

The Hebrew word for vanity is the word “Hebel,” which is translated as “breath,” “vapor,” or “spirit.” For Ecclesiastes life is that way. For Ecclesiastes the “wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north ... all streams run to the sea and the sea is not full” (Ecclesiastes 1:6).

Ecclesiastes looks around him and he cannot make sense of life. “What has been is what will be and there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1: 9). For Ecclesiastes there is a terrible impartiality to life. That is a stubborn fact that has been a stumbling block to faith for many people through the ages.

Long ago, on Calvary, stood three crosses. Surely in a righteous world so cruel a fate would fall on only those who had done terrible things. But look at them: one, a thief profane and blasphemous; another a thief ashamed and penitent; the third, the most divine spirit that had ever blessed the earth. How is it possible that the same fate could come alike to all?

How often we struggle with the terrible impartiality of life! An earthquake strikes a country like Haiti, already reeling from the after-effects of a hurricane and thousands of lives are lost – churches and schools, children and students.

In the past year and half our country has felt the terrible impact of a severe economic recession. Many families have suffered the loss of jobs, incomes, and security. Many elderly people who are living off fixed incomes have suffered as well. Surely the writer of Ecclesiastes has a point. All things come alike to all. There is a terrible impartiality to life.

II.

That is why it is important to place alongside the words of Ecclesiastes the writing of Paul to the Church at Rome: “All things work for good for those who love God and who are called according to his purposes.” Paul is dealing with the same issues as is Ecclesiastes. He knows about the principalities and powers.

He not only knew about it. He had experienced it. “Yes,” he says, “All things come alike to all people.” And who better to say this than the Apostle Paul. Listen to his words: Of the Jews I received the forty stripes save one. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once he was stoned by an angry mob. He had been shipwrecked, floating on the Mediterranean Sea. He had suffered hunger and thirst, cold and nakedness. And one day they took him out on the Appian Road and killed him.

Yes, cries out Paul. All things come alike to all. It is the truth but it is not the whole truth. We also know that all things work together for good for those who love God.

So the writer of Ecclesiastes and the Apostle Paul stand over against each other. They are both dealing with the same facts, but they reach very different conclusions. One deals with life in terms of cynicism, the other rises to a glowing triumph.

Is there any question more basic than this: does life make sense? When you parse it all out, is there some order, purpose, meaning to our lives or is it all chaos? At the end of the day there are two roads and each of us has to decide which road we wish to take.

There is a verse in the Book of Romans that has always fascinated me: “Experience,” writes Paul “produces hope.” Actually, that is precisely what experience does not do for a lot of people. It produces disillusionment; it works cynicism and despair and unbelief. How many young people have started out with great optimism, cheerfulness, and enthusiasm only to be crushed by the

terrible and unrelenting forces of evil and discouragement? No, experience does not always produce hope.

Once in a while we meet a person like the Apostle Paul, not living an easy life, but a hard life – facing “all things.” Yet he talks about being strengthened with power in the inward person, about learning how to abound and to be abased, about being able to do all things through God who strengthens him. And at the last he says to his friend Timothy, “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.”

When I encounter someone like that, I cannot help but wonder what are some of the elements that entered into Paul’s conviction?

III.

For one thing, Paul, like Jesus, understood that there is certain impartiality in life. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus notes that “God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). That is what Reinhold Niebuhr called “general providence.” There are certain good things that all people enjoy, whether they are good or evil. The rain does fall on the just and on the unjust.

In the same fashion there are bad things that also happen to people today. Of all the superstitions that have come to humankind, one of the worst is the notion is that all suffering is the result of some human sin. Most of us who are ministers have stood with a business person beside a ruined fortune or with a mother beside an empty cradle and heard the cry, “What sin did I commit to deserve this?” But let us take notice. You cannot trace every amount of human suffering with sin.

All through his ministry Jesus was face to face with this. One day in Jerusalem the tower of Siloam fell and crushed a group of workers. The rumor was running up and down the streets of Jerusalem that the men who were killed were the most wicked men in the whole city. But Jesus said, “Those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that these men were worse offenders than the other citizens of Jerusalem? I tell you, ‘No.’”

And when Jesus’ disciples brought to him a man who was born blind and asked Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” Jesus replied by saying “Neither did this man sin nor his parents” (John 9).

Or look, if you will, at the crucifixion of Jesus. Shall we trace the suffering of Jesus to some sin he committed? What sin? “Holy, guileless, undefiled, separated from sinners” – no we cannot trace the cross back to sin. Nor in our own lives do we have to do this. After all, there is certain impartiality in life. In this sense Ecclesiastes is right. All things come alike to all.

IV.

But, there is more. To be sure there is impartiality in life that befalls all us. But Paul saw something more. There were certain aspects in life where all things do not come alike to all.

The writer of Ecclesiastes was right when he observed that death comes to all of us. But death does not come always in like fashion. Benedict Arnold and George Washington both died. But did they die alike? Benedict Arnold betrayed his country. They say that on the final day of his life he took the American uniform that he had worn so proudly at Saratoga and held it in his hands and wept. And so he died – an outcast in a far off country.

As for George Washington, he died as well. But look at the circumstances of his legacy. He was acclaimed the “father of his country” and pilgrims today still flock to Mt. Vernon to pay their respects to this man who was one of the greatest Presidents this country has ever known. Not all things come alike to all.

One of the public figures whom I greatly admired was Dean Rusk, who was a classmate at Davidson College with my father. Dean Rusk was the son of a Presbyterian minister. Rusk graduated from Davidson, was chosen a Rhodes Scholar, and later served as Secretary of State under President John Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson. When Dean Rusk left the State Department, he took none of his papers with him. He did not believe they belonged to him but to the federal government. He never “cashed in” on his years as Secretary of State, as so many politicians do. He lived a simple life and never expected to benefit financially from his years in Washington. Is there any one of us here today who does not long for that kind of integrity and devotion to public service that is so sadly lacking in our nation’s capital?

Ecclesiastes is right. Death comes to us all. But not all are remembered in the same way.

V.

But, I believe there is another dimension to Paul’s conviction about the Christian life. “All things work together for good,” he wrote, “for those who love God and who are called according to God’s purposes.” For Ecclesiastes, life is what happens to us. For Paul, life is also what we make of it. Paul does not see himself as a victim, but believes that whatever befalls a person; God can take that and make that for good.

One has to admit that Paul himself was able to do this. There is a growth in Paul’s life of faith that is present in his Epistles. When one comes to his final testimonies – Philippians, Romans, Ephesians – all written from prison, one sees a triumphant spirit at work.

After all, look what he had been through: joy and sorrow, sickness and health, prosperity and failure. He had been worshipped as a god and had been stoned as a felon. He had been welcomed as a savior and imprisoned as a criminal. All things had happened to him, but he had taken the good and the bad and with God’s help was convinced that they all worked for good.

Over the years that kind of experience has happened to many people. George Matheson was one of the most famous and beloved ministers of the Church of Scotland. As a young minister, he had a career full of promise. But blindness came upon him and the young woman he loved abandoned him. He wrote a letter to his Presbytery saying that he was giving up on ministry, but his Presbytery responded by saying that they did not want him to leave his pastorate. So he stayed and became a greatly effective and beloved minister.

At the end of his life he wrote a hymn we still sing today:

“O love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the love I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow,
May richer, fuller be.”

That is real religion and that is something all of us need. There is so much today that flies under the flag of religion that is anything but.

But to go through life with the love of God and the love of other people at the center of our lives, that is real religion so that as the years pass, we can say, “all things work together for good.”

That is real religion.

Amen.