

First Presbyterian Church
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Subject: Work
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No Regrets

Primary Scripture: Ecclesiastes 2:17-26
Secondary Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

When I first heard this passage in scripture, I was a college student and I thought there, there is a truth in the Bible I can grasp onto.

All this toil, all this labor, all of it is so meaningless. I was college student, after all, and it was so toilsome and laborious: I had to wake up at 10:00am for a 10:15 course; I had to practice division I-AA non-scholarship football for a few hours a day; I had all my meals cooked and provided for me.

It was toil and labor. It seemed so meaningless.

As the years have progressed, I've come to understand what King Solomon was crying out there a little more. As the monotony and routine we go through day after day; when we strive for more and more but at the end of the day we see how meaningless it can be: Working or looking for work; parenting or looking for love; it seems so endless and tiresome.

There is a picture going around on the internet for pastors. It has three different photos in it. The first one says, "Pastors, what they think they do" and shows us standing before the multitude in very fancy garb leading thousands of people in worship of Almighty God.

The next picture says "what our friends think we do." And shows us out on the golf course.

The third picture says, "What we actually do." And it shows a pile of paperwork looming over us.

I am here to tell you there is some truth to that as I have enjoyed the joys of the federal food program, fair credit report acts and equipment leases. At least I can delude myself and claim, "Oh, I am working for the church, I'm working for God." But at the same time we all know that experience of toil and labor and work that seems routine and monotonous over and over again. And the fruitlessness that it provides.

1.

The meaninglessness, the hopelessness, the despair that Solomon talks about. That at night our minds cannot even rest (vs. 23).

I was reading a book this past week called *I am Second*.

It is different stories of people's transformation and encounters with Jesus Christ and the final chapter is the story of Norm Miller, the CEO of interstate batteries. He shares this part of his life story:

My goals were simple. I wanted plenty of money and a great family. Nothing too crazy. I wasn't trying to be the next Bill Gates, I just wanted to be comfortable. And by the time I was 35, I reached those goals. I was making more money than I ever thought I would and I had a beautiful wife and kids who loved me.

But I wasn't happy.

I traveled the country selling and setting up distributorships for interstate batteries, the company I would one day get to run. Every day I hit the road and convinced shop owners to sell my batteries. The days were long and the work was heavy. And so drinking began as a way to relax after a long day's work. Then it became a way to get to sleep at night.

Drinking began to move into every aspect of my life. There was always a reason. So I started to read the Bible to see what it had to say about me. I wasn't thinking about eternal life or super spirituality, I was focused on the here and now and making it through this day. My life was in shambles, I was unfulfilled and empty. I thought if I reached my goals I would be happy, but the reversed happened. I had all the money and success I ever wanted but I was miserable and anxious. I wanted to know the truth.

So I started to read the Bible to see if a person with a brain, with an intellect could actually believe that these stories were true.

So you can imagine when Norm Miller comes across the middle of God's story in Ecclesiastes, King Solomon's Letter, how much it resonated with his own heart. That even at night, Solomon writes, my mind could not rest (v. 23).

It was meaningless.

It was chasing after the wind.

King Solomon—he was the son of King David, one of the great three leaders of the Old Testament. Moses, Abraham, and David. King Solomon was his son; the heir to his throne.

David established the Kingdom of Israel and led the people. Solomon got the privilege to take that over and to rule and to lead. He had great power, great wealth, privilege, opportunity. It is recorded that Solomon had 700 wives. I don't think he did that out of commitment and love to these women, but out of strategic self-preservation. They were foreign women who he could align his country and himself to perpetuate his kingdom down the line.

It is said that his annual salary was 666 talents of Gold. Those who know biblical numerology would perk up at the number 666. His annual salary was 25 tons of gold.

He was a man of great wealth, great privilege, power and esteem.

He got to be the one who built the Temple of God. The very place where God was to reside. God, YHWH, the God who led the people through Israel, Solomon was the one who got to put him into a house, to limit Him, to establish a place to domestic God.

Solomon took the reign of his father, and took it to a higher level.

A few years back, I read a book by Walter Brueggemann called *Prophetic Imagination*. In reading it, he totally reoriented the way I read and understand Solomon. In his book he talks about how King Solomon should not be seen as a culmination of the Kingdom of Israel, but as one of the low points.

Yes, Solomon was one of the wisest men of all time, but in his pursuit of wealth, power and building this kingdom he started to tax the people. He started to institute slavery and build a standing army.

It's the very thing Israel fled Egypt, fled the Pharaoh. 1,000 years after Moses, who led the people out of slavery, now Israel—God's chosen people—began to do these very same things.

So at the end of his life, Solomon is able to cry out and say "I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun" (v. 20). He was able to look back and see the way in which his obsession with self-preservation, of wealth, was meaningless toil - like chasing after the wind.

Something that cannot be grasped, but we run and constantly pursue - in the end leaving us feeling empty.

A life served around ourselves and self-preservation in the end feels empty and meaningless.

I've come to notice in recent conversations I have had at the presbytery and broader church levels where we discuss how to get the youth and young adults to come to the church that our conversations center around helping them fall in love with the church.

That is institutional self-preservation.

Why are we so focused in getting them to fall in love with the church, rather than getting them to fall in love with Jesus Christ?

How much in our own lives are we building wealth, amassing privilege, power, esteem out of our own desire for self-preservation, building our families for ourselves rather than service to God?

So we can relate to the meaningless cried out by Solomon and Norm Miller.

2.

Then if we turn back to the first reading from 1 Thessalonians and look at the life of Paul, of the great missionary, we see a different trajectory he took. Paul was the Pharisee of Pharisees. The greatest leader of the time. He was heading in the right direction. He was an urban man, a cosmopolitan world traveler. The other disciples were fishermen, were country folk. Paul was the great Pharisee. His hands were soft for he had scribes who would do all the work for him. He was an intellectual heavyweight. And Scripture reports that in his early life he went around and actually would murder Christians for their faith. So his hands, while soft, were covered with the blood of his sins.

Then he had a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. There he encountered the Risen Lord. There he saw the nails that had been put through Jesus' wrist and feet, the wound on his side. There he encountered the love of Christ; he realized the blood shed on the cross for him, washed away the blood on his hands.

And so Paul moved in a new trajectory, a new direction in a life that wasn't filled with meaninglessness but service to Christ. He moved into communities.

This is the first letter of Paul that we have recorded, this letter to the Thessalonians. He moved into this town.

It says, “You know, Brothers and Sisters, beloved by God that He has chosen you because our message of the Gospel came to you in word and by the power and conviction of the Holy Spirit” (v.6)

Here Paul is in the city, out on the streets, going into the school yards and business offices, embodying the love of Jesus Christ to the people. And this is how they began to see the love of God.

He says that they became an imitator of us and of the Lord.

This town, this city began to imitate Paul; began to imitate Silas.

The men there witnessing to Jesus Christ began to embody it themselves and then it spilled further into Macedonia. Into the region. People started to report and talk about this good news. “The people of those regions report what kind of welcome they had among you.”

The love of God began to spill forth because of Paul’s encounter with Jesus Christ.

Paul, rather than staying far removed like King Solomon in the temple courts, heading in the trajectory of the Pharisee of Pharisees, he reoriented his life and gave it to the service of Jesus Christ.

Those soft hands began to be calloused as he took up tent making to afford his career as a missionary. Paul began to embody, began to live a life in service to Christ.

3.

So it begs the question for us, what might that look like for us today?

How might we, when we go into a boardroom seeking to strike the best business deal, not ask how we can get the most out of it for ourselves but seek to embody and demonstrate the ethics of Jesus Christ?

How might we, on a date, not be thinking about how to make the person fall in love with us but to see the love of Jesus Christ?

How might we in the monotony of routine life, of having to do laundry of filling out paperwork, of grading student’s papers, how might we not get bothersome and find it toilsome but spend a moment praying for the person who is wearing those clothes, for the students, for the job ahead of us?

How might we invite people here for our summer camps not because we want to feel better about ourselves but because we want them to experience the transformative love of Jesus Christ?

Perhaps you have heard the story of William Borden of the Borden dairy farm family. I hadn’t heard the story until this past spring, but it is a tremendous story of a man who lived his life for Christ.

He was the heir to the Borden dairy farm. At age 16 in 1904 he was worth millions of dollars. His family was grooming him, preparing him to take over the dairy farm when he had a life changing encounter with Jesus Christ. He was at Yale on his way up, heading in this trajectory, when suddenly he felt called to change things. He felt called to go to China to witness to Christ among the Muslim nation. And so he gave up everything in order to pursue that.

Friends, family came to him and said, William, are you sure about this?

And he responded that he had no reservation.

In fact he wrote on the back of his Bible: No Reservation.

And so he prepared himself to move overseas, to give up the dairy farm and to venture this way. In his journey he stopped off in Egypt in order that he may better learn the context and culture that he would be facing in China. There he caught spinal meningitis and within a year died. So his family went over to Egypt to pick up his body with his belongings and they found his Bible. There under the statement, “No reservations” were two more phrases:

No Retreat

No Regrets

Borden had given up the dairy farm, had given up privilege and power without reservation. When faced with calamity, when faced with hardship he did so without retreat. And then a 25 year old man on his deathbed he was able to boldly claim that he lived a life with No Regrets.

He lived a life with no regrets because he realized he was living in the very manner that God, Himself, has chosen to live with us.

God looked down on us, saw our brokenness, saw our sinfulness, saw all that we were and he realized without hesitation, with no reservation, that he would send his only Son, Jesus Christ, to live with us, to walk with and among us without reservation.

And when Jesus was betrayed, arrested, rejected by his friends, when he was beaten, spat upon and nailed to a cross. People mocked and cried out, “Jesus, save yourself, prove to us you are the great God and get yourself down from there.” When facing calamity, Jesus had no retreat.

And the good news of Easter morning is that the pain and the death Jesus went through for us, that paid for our sins, Jesus’ was resurrected from death to life and in the end of God’s plan there is no regrets.

Friends may we live a life for and in service to Jesus Christ because a life lived for Christ is a life that is lived with no regrets.

Thanks be to God.

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Works used:

The Bible—NRSV

Walter Bruggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*.

Doug Bender, *I am Second*.

+this is a transcript so grammar is not good always