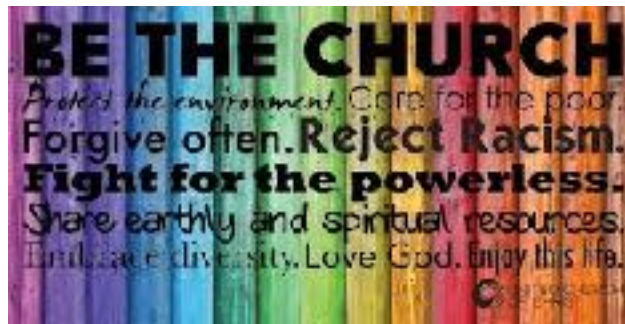


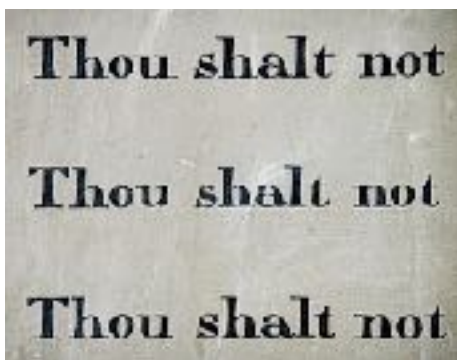
Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, October 27, 2019
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
“*Modernity’s Re-Catalyzation of Existential Angst*”
The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Ecclesiasticus 6:1-6
Christian Scripture: Matthew 6:25-34



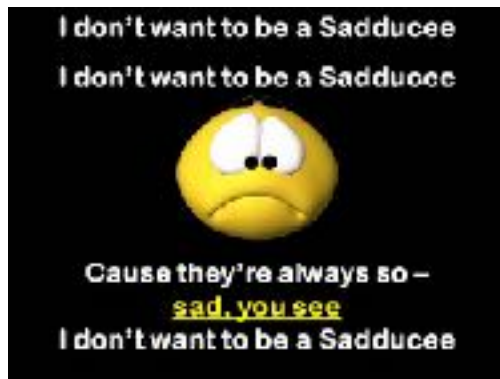
Welcome to the sixth sermon in our eight-week series ‘Be the Church’. In this sermon series we have explored ‘what does it mean to “Be the Church”’? By focusing on this question for two months, I have come to perceive that last week’s theme ‘Love God’ is perhaps the most seminal, the most important. Yes, I believe ‘Protect the Environment’ is the most important *issue* of our time that Christians must confront. Yes, we still live in a society that is racist and homophobic and the church is called to proclaim the kingdom of God for all people (“Embrace Diversity” and “Reject Racism”). And of course, the church is called to “Care for the Poor” - a topic we will explore next week in November.



Nonetheless, I believe that following hot off the heels of 'Love God' is the second most important theme of our series: "Enjoy This Life". The church is called to enable us, to help us, to 'Enjoy This life". Yet, I believe a great argument can be made that of all our nine themes, "Enjoy This Life" is the *one* theme that the church has most epically failed to help us foster! Historically speaking, even now, the church has excelled in making people's lives miserable!



The church often makes us feel guilty with all of its 'Thou Shalt Nots', and its "I Am Not Worthies", and its "Doth Sayith the Lords" - complete with lightening, thunder, and burning pits of sulphur.



The church, as did ancient first century Judaism through the Pharisees and Sadducees, seems to make it an ecclesiastical industry to make people feel like rubbish. The church has an tendency to often say to us, “You’re *not* doing enough” and “you need to do *more*” when so much of us are hanging-on by a string and have no more to give. The church encourages us to ‘praise God’, but it so it so often makes us miserable doing it! I can evaluate my own ministry and my own emphases as a minister and call myself to repent. For my part as a minister in this centuries old dysfunctional behaviour, I ask for your forgiveness.



Brothers in sisters in Christ, may we never ever forget that Jesus preached that he wished for us to have life, and not just to have life, but to have it abundantly (John 10:10)! We are to ‘Enjoy This Life’ and enjoy it abundantly!

In many ways the Left has captured the church and arguably focused too much on justice issues; there is injustice around every corner to the extent that even this sermon series can be used as a cudgel to suck the life right out of us. And in many ways the Right has captured the other half of the church and used it to judge, ostracize, condemn, and marginalize others making everyone inside and outside the church miserable. Neither one of these ecclesiastical extremes are what the church should be about. The church, the Body of Christ, is intended to enable us to ‘Enjoy This Life’.

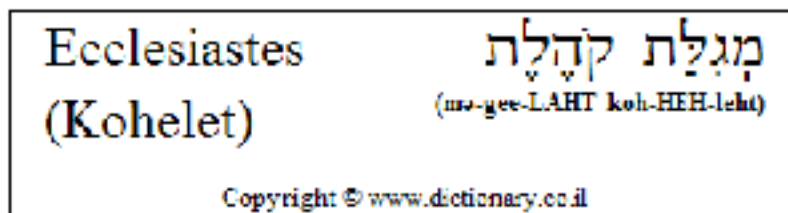


Our scripture reading from Ecclesiastes is revealing. There are really half a dozen quintessential scriptures from Ecclesiastes that articulate essentially the same philosophy as the one that Bill read for us. The philosophy is: “Don’t worry about it”; “Relax”; “Chill-Baby-

chill”; and in the immortal words of Bobby McFerrin, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy”.



If the author of Ecclesiastes was a musician, he or she would be a reggae singer!

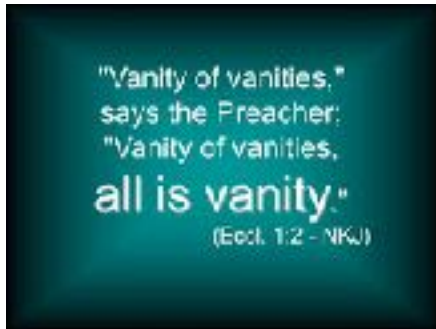


Two things about Ecclesiastes before I move-on to our gospel reading and conclude this message: The writer of Ecclesiastes, ‘Qoheleth’, which is a pseudonym for King Solomon, wrote at a time *before* there was a concept of an afterlife, *before* the concept of heaven and hell was adopted. So, while one is not to transgress God’s laws and while one is to be of good moral character, wise, and industrious, Qoheleth argues that whether we do or not, we all end up in the same place - Sheol.



Sheol was nebulous sort of pit, a ‘neither here nor there’ place where the dead sleep eternally. In contrast, our theme is written from a Christian perspective. It intentionally encourages us to ‘Enjoy *This* Life [on Earth]’ implying there is *another* afterlife to be enjoyed. The injunction to “Enjoy This Life” thus does not advocate a libertine nor hedonist position such as, “Enjoy life however you wish, for it’s the only one you have”. As people of the Christian faith, we are certain there is a ‘*this* life’ and there is the one to come when we are reunited perfectly with our Creator.

The second and last point about Ecclesiastes brings us to our gospel reading. Ecclesiastes has a perspective that does not discount the moral life nor does it discount industry, but it places them into perspective. Qoheleth seems to say throughout his book that being a moral person is important, but not if you’re going to be a miserable wretch being that so-called ‘moral person’.



Qoheleth rightly says, and I'm paraphrasing here, 'There's little point in doing everything right if you are devoid of happiness and your strip it away from those you encounter'. Qoheleth seems to remind us that life is to be enjoyed despite the imperative to live justly and wisely. Otherwise, what's the point?

Jesus, we must remember who is a moralist and a social justice advocate extraordinaire, perhaps surprisingly holds the same perspective as Qoheleth. Jesus seemingly has a highly *laisse-faire* attitude about life.

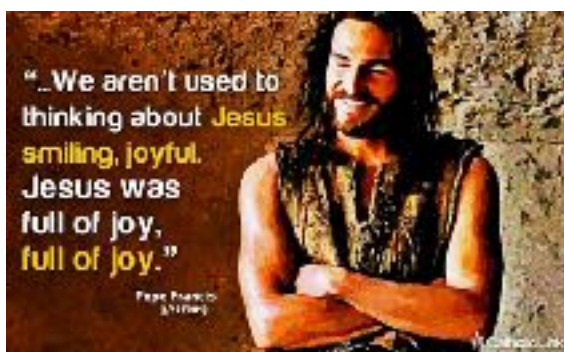


When we hear this scripture, we can almost mistakenly imagine Jesus drinking a beer under a tree with a joint in his hand saying, "*Que sera, Que sera.*" ["Whatever will be, will be."] Yet, nothing in Jesus' ministry suggests that he advocated a lifestyle that was selfish,

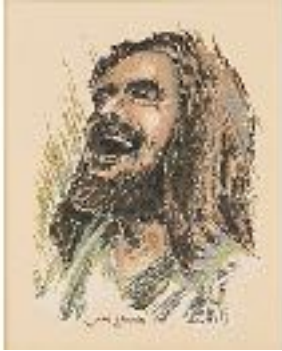
gluttonous, nor lazy. Certainly not. In our scripture, Jesus is *not* stating that we are to be like birds - just flying around enjoying themselves.



(Truth be told, we know now that many birds actually work very hard! In South Africa, there are male weaver birds who struggle mightily making nests for their mates. They spend all day collecting grass and meticulously weaving nests for their female partners. Then, the female comes to the nest to inspect it. If she sees one blade of grass out of place, she tears the whole bloody thing down and her mate has to start all over again from scratch! But, I digress.) Jesus is, using an extreme example, communicating a simple lesson about balance, perspective, and priority. Jesus never sets-up a false binary, or false dichotomy, whereby wisdom, justice-seeking, and morality come at the expense of joy. No! We create that false choice in our own heads and hearts.



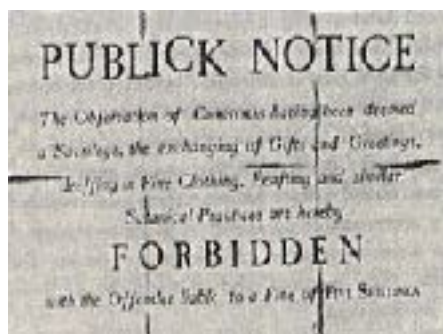
Jesus, who I believe is in tune with the author of Ecclesiastes, advocated that life is to be enjoyed and it is most easily enjoyed if we are wise, justice-seeking, and moral people.



What Jesus and Qoheleth are warning us against is being wise, justice-seeking, and moral people *at the expense of* love, happiness, and joy.



Jesus reacted to the Pharisees of his day who weaponized being moral, thus making everyone miserable!



Jesus reacted to our Congregational forbearers, the seventeenth-century Puritans, who were so God-conscious they can be considered to have sucked the joy right out of life with their no dancing, no music, and no public nudity. (OK, I'm not advocating public nudity. But you get the point.) Jesus reacted to what I suffer from today, in our modern world: over-obligation.



Though I am person of enormous privilege, I stress over my car insurance, Micah's car insurance, my pension, health care for my family, my employment (work performance and the stewardship campaign), the cable bill, the rent, and my car payment. I worry about if I'm getting enough exercise; I worry about my electric bill; have I paid my credit card balance, and what about my children's higher education? None of these obligations are, in and of themselves, bad. I would argue that they are all legitimate concerns. But, friends, in today's modern world we suffer from that which those in Qoheleth's time suffered. That is, creating so much responsibility and industry for ourselves that we are unable to enjoy this life!

And so it is with the church. We must never forget that we fight for justice, we care for the poor, and we seek moral lives in order to enable us to enjoy this life, not to diminish its enjoyment.



I knew from the very first week as minister of this church that some of our members give so much of themselves to this church that it begins to hurt. And perhaps some are not able any longer to enjoy being in the church.

Therefore, I am so glad to have included in your service bulletin notices encouraging your participation in two activities this coming week.



The first was supported by Carlene McCarty and Heidi Mario and the second by Priscilla Svec. The first is a Halloween treat hand-out at our front steps during and after the Horribles Parade and the second is our gleaning outing at Scott Farm.



Both events emphasize that which I and we at Centre Church probably do not emphasize enough: Just having fun and *enjoying this life* together in fellowship. We should be doing more of these activities. God does not desire us to praise him and does not wish for us to be moral, generous, and in solidarity if we are prevented from enjoying this life more fully. At Centre Church, let's commit ourselves to 'Be the Church' by enjoying this life to its fullest extent.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, "Amen".