

# Eat, Drink, and Be Merry

July 31, 2022

Today's readings are in stark contrast with one another, yet share a common resolution: "Eat, drink, and be merry!" That's great news in prime grilling season! Besides culinary advice for us all, perhaps both passages reveal insights into the human condition. Insights that matter to us today as much as they did two millenia ago.

Do you recall the emphasis of the Ecclesiastes reading? Many of us hear refrains of "Turn, turn, turn," a popular rock song of the 1970s based on this scripture. Yet I want to emphasize "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." It seems that Qoheleth (pronounced Co-HELL-eth), the Jewish author of Ecclesiastes, was forever a downer on life; the glass never exceeded half-full. The translation we use today is "vanity," not in the sense of an inflated ego, but the ephemeral nature of life – here today and gone tomorrow. Nothing tangible or permanent to grasp – the very essence of futility.

May I take a little side trip? The gender of Qoheleth is unclear. Written as early as 450 B.C., the original Hebrew text provides female attributes to the speaker. In many translations, writers simply use "Preacher" or "Teacher" to avoid confusion. In any case, Qoheleth addresses the Jewish assembly as one of its own members. Let's keep in mind that Qoheleth may be one woman with a very dismal outlook on life. Back to our story.

For Qoheleth, everything comes to naught. There is no purpose in life. While many of us decorate our homes with upbeat plaques like "Live, Laugh and Love," Qoheleth would have mounted "You can't take it with you" or "Death and Taxes." This writer focuses on the futility of work, wealth, and wisdom. To paraphrase: "Work is constant toil; seeking wisdom does no one any good because it won't stave off death; wealth only goes to the undeserving."

A modern day Qoheleth would be "Eeyore," the miserable donkey from Winnie the Pooh. On Eeyore's good days, he can barely utter "It's all for naught." His outlook on life? "It's the only cloud in the sky. And it's drizzling. Right on me. Somehow, I am not surprised."

All of us have been there at some time. And for good reason. Losing a spouse or close relative. Losing a job. Receiving a health-threatening diagnosis. These and many other life circumstances will bring down the most eternal optimist. The foundations shake; our futures vanish; we've lost our bearings. Those beliefs we've treasured vanish for the moment. As a preaching instructor guided me and others, "There's a broken heart in every pew."

I want to share a lighted-hearted look at life that sometimes ends very poorly. At times, I've been an avid golfer but also have stepped away from the game for long periods. In my active golf years, I loved making chip shots. For those of you unfamiliar with the game, golfers use clubs that will neatly place a short shot on the green. For me, it was poetry in motion. Imagine with me, a great start. My first shot straight down the fairway, landing about 30 yards from the green. Taking out a club just for this kind of shot, I stand comfortably in front of the ball. The sun is warming my back; a gentle breeze caresses my arms. I slowly raise the club backward, and let the club gently swing through. Keeping my head down, I can hear the club lightly clip

the grass below the ball. The ball gently lifts toward the hole. I look up beholding a perfect arc into an azure sky; the ball lands on the green, hopping once, then rolling near the pin. Poetry. Life is magnificent.

When it's time to complete this athletic feat, I read the green before putting. Golfers look for the slant of the green, calculating just how much arc is needed to perfectly guide the ball into the cup. One practice swing then the moment of truth – a slight swing back, and just follow the ball into the cup.

The ball passes the cup by inches and rolls further down the incline. I go through the routine again. Short. I try once more. Let's just say, no par for me. I've probably double or triple bogeyed by now – that's three over par. Usually an embarrassment among golfers. But you know what? Every hole is a new chance, so off we go to the next tee.

I've played with Qoheleth before. Well, seemingly. Golfers, have you ever slammed your driver into the ground after sending a shot deep into the woods? Who has not winced at a vulgar tantrum when someone whiffs the ball? Non golfers, what acts of utter frustration have you watched? Thrown tennis rackets, fist fights, parents screeching their lungs out over their child's softball defeat? Truth be known, I have demonstrated less than angelic behavior after some shots. "Vanity. Vanity. All is vanity."

Qoheleth spends seven chapters bemoaning her fate. In chapter eight, the teacher expresses a change of heart: "Eat, drink, and be merry."

On that note, we pick up Luke's story of the rich man. Our story opens with a man asking Jesus to knock some sense into his brother to split the family bounty. Jesus must have rolled his eyes and simply declined yet another petty request. Instead, he tells a parable about greed.

He describes a rich man whose life could not be any better. The harvests have been good; the barns bulge with crops and still there's more to savor. Our farmer ponders a new problem – just too much stuff. His brainstorm? A bigger and better barn. Not only that, the farmer basks in his shrewdness:

"I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry!'"

But God has the last laugh. "You fool. This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Both individuals come up with the same resolution to "Eat, drink, and be merry," but seemingly from opposite ends of the spectrum. Let's consider the rich man first.

If the mega farmer had a spectacular harvest, he probably did not do all the work alone. He must have hired laborers to plant, weed, harvest and store the bounty. Not only was there plenty of food, there probably were vineyards, wells, houses for the workers and a lavish homestead for

our farmer. Might there not have also been large families supporting the laborers and the farm owner? And just who would build the new barn?

But the farmer acknowledged no one but himself. The myth of the self-made man. Nary a thought of God, the source of all we have on earth. He ignores family, workers and community – the blessings of human relationships. The farmer simply looks forward to a cushy retirement for himself alone. Never to worry about creature comforts again: “Eat, drink, and be merry.”

Then God suggests there may be a problem ahead. “For tonight you will die. Now who will reap the benefits of your toil and craftiness?”

Qoheleth came from the opposite direction. The teacher knows all about the futility of work. All the toil that we all must endure cannot forestall death one second longer. The wisest among us, devoting their lives to understanding the ways of the world, will die just as surely as one who only lives for the moment. Riches? They will only go to the undeserving. Life just is not fair.

Of the two examples, it’s actually Qoheleth who emerges blessed by personal struggles. She slowly comes to see human toil actually as a calling from God. Don’t get me wrong: work is just that – hard work. The calling provided purpose for Qoheleth, those around her, and God. Sometimes we hear the lingo, “Do what makes you happy and you’ll never work a day in your life.” While that may be a bit optimistic, we recognize that work gives us meaning and identity. For example, we often introduce ourselves as a teacher, doctor or accountant. Certainly, no job is perfect, and it requires exertion – both mental and physical. Yet many of us do consider work a calling that fits our talents, interests and sense of mission.

Wealth, however relative it may be, is also a gift. Certainly, wealth comes in many forms. For some, it’s a 401K account; for others, it’s a lifelong circle of friends and family. Or both and more. President Jimmy Carter cautioned us almost 50 years ago:

“Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.”

Elizabeth Webb, an Episcopalian theologian writing 10 years ago, described Qoheleth’s discovery:

The cure for despair and hopelessness, and the desire of God for human beings, is to find joy precisely in this wearying life. Several times (2:24-25; 3:12-13; 5:18) Qoheleth asserts that, when confronted with the apparent meaninglessness of life, the best we can do is enjoy ourselves — take joy in eating, drinking, even in our work. A particular joy is to be found in companionship with one another; two are better than one, he writes, “For if they fall, one will lift up the other” (4:9-10). We are to see such enjoyment in play, in work, and in relationships as gifts from God; indeed, enjoyment comes “from the hand of God” (2:24).

Qoheleth's advice rings true today as it did thousands of years ago. Money and possessions are necessary to live. But as Qoheleth learned by Chapter 8, human relations and spiritual life far exceed the benefits of bounty.

Look around! Find the temporal glories in this life. Recognize them for what they are: glimpses of creation sparking our gratitude to God for our very lives.

What makes you merry? What causes us to utter a short prayer of thanks to God for the blessings of life? Consider the pleasures of summer: a freshly picked strawberry, gentle rains nurturing our gardens, the warmth of sunshine by day and cool breezes at night.

As for me, it's time to tee up.

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**Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23; Luke 12:13-21**  
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