Devotional on Ecclesiastes 8:1-17 and Matthew 10:16-23

I didn’t understand something very important when I was younger: there’s a time to talk to someone about a difficult topic and there’s a time to let stuff develop because a person is not yet willing to listen.

But, having children, having teenagers, having young adults, pastoring people, making many mistakes borne of anger and impatience, all of these have begun, notice I said, have begun, to make their mark on me! I’m slowly waking up to the fact that just as important as what words to say is when I say them.

To recognize this is to recognize that human beings and human societies are not first and foremost governed by rationality but by strong emotions like fear, guilt and shame. When I was young and inexperienced I tried yelling at the referee when he made a bad call; all I got for my efforts was a technical foul and a benching by my coach.

When I was an inexperienced husband and father I tried to overpower emotions with reason and ended up manipulating with anger. When I was inexperienced as a minister I tried to sell “my vision for the church” without consulting others and found that I didn’t get much buy in.

But slowly, the scars of failure, begin to bring humility. This is one of the great insights of Ecclesiastes. Remember how earlier in the book, in chapter 3 to be exact, Qohelet has said “There’s a time for everything, and a season for every activity?” Now in chapter 8, he says, “For every matter has it’s time.”

In particular, how we do things and what we say must fit in with the reality that certain political realities are unavoidable. The most dangerous time in any particular culture is when the rich and politically powerful are feeling vulnerable. So, for instance, if you’re a Christian, a muslim, or indeed have any kind of faith in God, and presently you live in China, you need to be very careful what you say and how you say it.

Jesus predicts that his followers will always need to practice discretion with their speech and their ideas, however important, however truthful they are. We are not supposed to look for trouble; don’t worry, living for and in His Truth will lead some of us to trouble even if we’ve previously fled from it.

There are some of us who relish a battle; in the language of personality tests we’re more the challengers or leaders in the making and when we see something is amiss, or corrupt or is being neglected our natural tendency to say something. “This must stop!” Whether that’s misogyny, or abuse, or racism, or favoritism towards the elites. Or, “This must start!” Whether more radical policies addressing the climate crisis, or safer longterm care facilities, or fairer taxation of the rich.

If we’re like that we need to heed Ecclesiastes and Jesus carefully. There’s a telling of the truth that finds the right way and the right time, a charitable editorial that points out all the good that’s being done but “suggests” that more could be done.

When your teenager comes to you looking for advice don’t just say “everything’s fine” now, they’re signalling they’re ready to hear you.

Early in the lockdown I featured Mark Carney’s editorial in the Economist in which he said that economic values need to yield to human values and noted that only in a time when we realize that it’s the lower middle class who are holding all the freight for the upper classes, taking all the risks in getting ill, can we begin to recognize that more equality as at the heart of a thriving society.

What top economists wouldn’t dare whisper, including, arguably, the world’s leading economist, is now being “shouted” in the most influential economic journals. There’s a time for the truth that challenges the status quo and there’s a time to let things develop.

But, to get back to Ecclesiastes, “because a King’s word is supreme, who can say to him ‘what are you doing?” Not only to the powerful but to those who are feeling ashamed or guilty or lazy or unfulfilled that question “what are you doing?” often doesn’t go down well.

It certainly brings out *my* defensive side. But if someone says to me “I’m interested on your thinking when it comes to these decisions” I might have some inkling that I’m still being questioned but at least the person is affording me the dignity of a listen, affording me the dignity of a dialogue.

So that’s a given, but how we share it, not abrasively but invitingly, not accusingly, but with an ear to listen, that’s everything!

We have far more influence on each other when our speech is couched in the context of genuine care and when we genuinely listen. Parents take note! Leaders take note! Doerksen take note!

This helps us understand the famous yet cryptic “wise as serpents innocent as doves” image from Jesus. He’s not expecting us to avoid speaking. Indeed, the thrust of our gospel reading assumes that all disciples of his must speak; must invite their friends, their neighbours and their governments to become partners in God’s Shalom, God’s Loving Justice, God’s Salvation! This is the given, this is God’s plan, we are the plan, and if we don’t share good news it’s as if there isn’t any!

What the image suggests is that our wisdom can be hidden (normally snakes are beneath our immediate vision); we can say things in a way that our neighbours can understand, we can invite questions or even answer questions with questions.

Sometimes when a neighbour discovers I’m a priest and asks something like “what do you believe about \_\_\_\_?” I’ll ask “I’d love to talk about that with you, why do you ask?” This often allows me to be far more effective in getting at their real questions.

We couch our speech in genuine care (the image of the dove). The first letter of Peter says, “Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

And then, if, as will still happen, we are maligned and accused and blatantly mistreated then we will know the joy of fully participating in the glory of God’s way, the way of Christ himself. This is the testimony of the saints.

Now, some of us are the other way, we see that someone needs to speak but we say, “not me, not on your life!” But that, without knowing it is exactly the point. There are times when we think we’re saving ourselves by not speaking out but then, in the end, by not speaking out, our integrity is shot and we are destroyed. I think of the Republicans in so many positions of power, who know they should be speaking out but are afraid.

There’s a famous quote from Martin Niemoeller, a German Lutheran pastor during the 1930’s:

First they came for the Communists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Communist  
Then they came for the Socialists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Socialist  
Then they came for the trade unionists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a trade unionist  
Then they came for the Jews  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Jew  
Then they came for me  
And there was no one left  
To speak out for me.

There really is a time to speak and woe to us, even for the sake of our children, if we become cowards in the face of that challenge! Wise as serpents yes, gentle as doves, yes, but not mute as a doorknob!

We Christians are called to have the sanest, most realistic view of human affairs. Power corrupts and we live in and amongst various regimes and governments that are all somewhere on the corruption continuum. You’re not protected from that reality if you’re in a democracy or if your favorite political party comes to power. The scriptures are clear on this.

In our day, even Christians are being seduced by the false gods of nationalism and the false security that comes from liberty defined as the ability to do whatever the hell you want, when you want.

Believe me, I’ve tried to point out the irony of this to some of my Christian friends online and they’re not at all willing to listen to me. In fact, the online world is basically useless for deep listening, growth and influence. This is a generalization but even what I would consider generally good podcasts and forums generally attract only those whose views who already fit it with the purposes of the podcast.

I commend to you our online Bible study as a genuine exchange of ideas and listening. Paul Thiessen does a great job!

Friends, sometimes it’s lonely to walk this journey; we feel as if we’re caught between howling mobs; we ourselves don’t have all the answers but this we do have: God’s Holy Spirit; the Love of God in us and through us! The Joy of participating with God though many keep their eyes and ears shut…for now!

Your efforts, in God, are not in vain. I was reading this week that the inveterate humanist Tom Hanks has recently converted to Greek Orthodoxy and I was amazed; he was so vehemently against the church for so many years!

As we read last week, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”