Devotional on an Epilogue
(Ecclesiastes 12:9-14; cf. Matthew 21:28-32)

Occasionally people feel like they’ve got to “gild the lily” or “paint the rose.” These sayings arise from Shakespeare and basically describe a phenomenon wherein we trip over ourselves by trying to add description to something that needs no added definition, something that is already clear.

Sometimes we do this because we feel we need the control of “the last word;” sometimes the perfect “thing” is jarring, unexpected or controversial. Gilding the lily then becomes a political act, a way to rescue the status quo when a truly revolutionary thought is laid out, demanding some kind of careful listening and possibly change.

There’s definitely bit of that going on at the very end of Ecclesiastes. The strong consensus of scholarship is that the book ends with Qohelet (the Teacher) describing our demise in old age and then ending how he began, “Vanity of vanity, says the Teacher, all is vanity.” Or as we’ve come to understand it “merest breath, says Qohelet, all is mere breath!”

Everything wisps away, life can’t be grasped, controlled or cheated; death comes for us all. The implicit question being, “will you spend your life living, becoming aware of the good around you, not the good that is out there some place and some different time?”

Will you spend your time fully alive to the people, the gifts, the places, the food and wine that you are privileged to live with, enjoy and share generously? Or will you try to control, acquire and plan your way in a vain attempt to avoid risk? In the process damaging yourself and those around you?

That’s my take on the last thing the teacher has to say, which is Ecclesiastes 12:8, but someone, some editor, bless his soul, wants to “make sure” we understand that the message of the book isn’t *that* radical, that it indeed has a place within conventional piety and religion; thus we have 12:9-14, the last word after the last word, depending on your perspective, an apt summary, or, as I tend to see it, a “painting of the rose.”

We are a conservative species; we can only hold one or two thoughts about change at any one point and so some of the things Qohelet has been saying would have seemed a stretch too far. Indeed, and this I admit is scholarly speculation, perhaps this book was understood as a deeply spiritual, deeply philosophical book but it needed a boost, an “afterward” and epilogue to get it included in Israel’s canon. We’ll never know for sure and that’s part of the beauty of the Bible it’s a dialogue and it invites us in to that dialogue.

What we can be sure of is that the voice in vs. 9-14 is not Qohelet; this is a voice that refers to him in the 3rd person, “the Teacher also taught…” and “The Teacher/Qohelet sought pleasing words…”

Whether a disciple or a literary editor, this is voice of someone who is trying to explain, interpret or justify Qohelet. In that sense it’s very beautiful because it’s the voice of anyone trying to take the message seriously, trying to give a Cole’s Notes version so that it can be practically applied. It’s you and I! The Preacher/Teacher has become this Preacher/Teacher; these committed Church participants in the Bible study and in Wisdom’s pursuit.

This is what the Bible is for. This is always a fraught process though, for in summarizing, in saying this is “what the Bible is about,” we can also caught off it’s radical voice and message.

Here, this voice tells us that Qohelet wasn’t just giving us esoteric wisdom, not just trying to say “on the one hand,” and “on the other hand” as he keeps us on a knife’s edge regarding how to live in contentment but with death in mind, in sensuous pleasure but without grasping for more etc.

This yin and yang approach might seem, ironically, not graspable for the masses (bingo!) so he says, the teacher gave us knowledge as well; almost as if he wants what Qohelet said to be measurable and not ambiguous. But Qohelet’s ambiguity is part of his genius! In other words, you can’t escape wisdom by means of knowledge even if you wanted to and wouldn’t that be to defeat the purpose.

And I can see by the reflections offered, Qohelet’s thoughts resonate with those who grapple with them; we don’t need to reduce the ambiguity!

I read the following this past week: ***“Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.”*** It isn’t discrete bits of knowledge that help us (tomatoes aren’t vegetables!) but knowing how to use the knowledge we have in order to help ourselves and others live well! **Knowledge is neutral, wisdom is knowledge applied through the crucible of human experience and character**.

Even this apologist, this epilogue writer is conflicted about this “Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.” Yes, but of course, wisdom would add, it’s knowing how to study the right things, it’s knowing when to study and when to converse and when to simply put your hand to the plow.

Nor, given what Ecclesiastes has been up to can there be simply a last word, something like “Fear God and keep God’s commands for that is the full duty of everyone.”

If this is an excuse to avoid the ambiguity, indeed, and attempt to redefine and/or stifle the necessity of wisdom as Qohelet has boldly and radically asserted; if this is an attempt to simply get people “not to think” and simply follow the commands of their elders who are speaking for God then clearly it must be rejected.

As Paul points out in the reflection, even within the Bible there are attempts at last words, the prophetic “Love mercy, do justice and walk humbly with God” is a necessary addition to “Fear God and keep his commandments” which, on its own, could be quoted by anyone, even jihadists or crusaders.

But I respect tradition, so I want to give this interpreter his due: there is another meaning, perhaps running counter to what the epilogue writer meant! “Fear God” means open to awe, to wonder, to living fully aware of God’s presence in the midst of God’s world now! Like the “prostitutes and tax collectors” of our gospel text, more open to grace, mercy and forgiveness then those who have “the religious knowledge.”

The way to life isn’t to “know much;” nor is it to make assertions about God or about what you’re going to do; it’s about opening to God and continuing, regardless of age, regardless of past sin or failure, to open to awe, to the new thing God is doing in you, in us!

Then the vanity of life isn’t to be despised; it’s breath-like feel and reality is simply the context of our ongoing interaction with the Spirit of Christ as we participate in the Kingdom of God. Now we are more aware of life’s fragmentary, uncertain nature; but at the same time, we are more open to it! Amen.