Devotional on Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 (cf. Matthew 13:1-13)

Human minds are remarkable, possibly the most remarkable arrangement of matter and spirit in the entire universe. And, believe me, that’s figuring in the profoundly human-centric nature of that statement! If you don’t believe me, just ask your dog, your cat will be in denial so don’t bother!

But…and you knew there would be a “but” after such an arrogant sounding statement in a devotional….but, wonderful as they are, they are finite and if the mind’s operator (a controversial statement in itself: isn’t the mind’s operator the mind!?) begins to tinker with “best operating practices” all kinds of glitches can arise.

Chapter 5:1-7 of Ecclesiastes deals with a few of these glitches and gives the remedy.

We remind ourselves: this book “Ecclesiastes” gets its daunting title from the Latin translation of the Hebrew title, Qohelet, which means something like: the Preacher, the Churchman or the Teacher.

In order to engage us, this Teacher has been impersonating Solomon, supposedly Israel’s wisest King, in an attempt to get his readers to face the true nature of our lives and what it takes to “keep it real.” That’s the overall goal: a way of approaching life within the limits and advantages of the lives God has given us.

Thus far, though, those of us who are explicit followers of the Way, we may have felt something was missing. Last week we looked at how a failure to observe the 10th commandent, “you shall not covet” plays out as Qohelet’s explanation of why the powerful oppress the poor and why the world is rife with injustice.

But what about the first commandment?

And as if on cue, Qohelet interrupts his ongoing argument about how meaningless and oppressive it is to worship “gain,” whether wealth, power, prestige or even wisdom, and talks to us about worship of God.

**True worship begins with the intention to draw near to God in order to listen.**  Monotheists have generally understood that the belief in One God means that God is omnipresent, that is everywhere. Not as a series of diffused particles, like dark matter or dark energy but because of God’s infinite difference and separateness from matter.

When Qohelet says “God is in heaven and you are on earth,” that seems to be what he’s getting at, he’s not describing two physical places: heaven and earth; rather, God is heavenly, eternal, infinite, awesome; we are earthly, finite, sometimes amazing, but incomplete.

So, drawing *near* to listen isn’t approaching *where* God is. To draw near to listen is to use the structure of the temple and its rituals which were designed symbolically to help the worshipper incline her ears to the eternal: to God!

Temple and Church are meant to be places of **meditative remembering** where we internalize what reality is; the reality of God and who we are and what God has called us to be and become. We worship in order that reality might seep into us and find good soil, in the words of our parable.

We need to listen because there are “birds,” “unforgiving soil” and “thorns” that won’t allow that small seed we heard in a homily, or in a prayer, or in a conversation with a parishioner to germinate.

What Jesus refers to in metaphors, Ecclesiastes names as particular “ways of being” that take us from the realm of true worship and leave us back in a denial of reality.

Qohelet talks **about folks who offer “sacrifices” without any clear idea of what they’re doing**. “Sacrifices” isn’t necessarily “sacrifices for sin” but simply the actions of worship. What we might call “going to church.”

In other words, probably the closest connection to our time would be “going to church” without any deliberate intention of bringing the whole self before God!

One of the most common ways our mind “glitches” is when we imagine that “going through the motions” is the same thing as true worship. We do so because we don’t really want God to tamper with our agenda. God might call us towards some action of loving justice, might ask us to give something of ourselves to the poor or the oppressed, might ask us to open our habits up to God’s searchlight for the sake of ourselves or our children; to avoid that possibility we “play church.”

*I’m guilty of this, and not just once!* The point of Jesus’ parable, the point of what Qohelet is saying isn’t to try to get us to feel guilty but to open our minds to true worship, to point out that to worship in spirit and truth isn’t necessarily an easy thing to do.

To come before God with full intentionality isn’t easy! Showing up a few minutes prior to the service in order to “prepare our hearts” used to be de jure amongst worshippers who adhered to the Great Tradition. A time to cultivate a sense of awe.

I didn’t appreciate it at the time, but my father would ask me to sit quietly with my brother before worship and I would sometimes feel the sheer difference of that in contrast to everything else in my life which was study, play, eat, sleep, read. He never told me what he was doing but he was modeling the beginnings of an attitude of awe.

Two more glitches of the mind: the first is **thoughtless words;** words said in boasting to God or about God to our fellows; these can be words of the stupid preacher, and there are, I dare say, many among us.

But also words of promise that are not kept e.g. hey, I’ll pray for you, but it’s just religious jargon, not followed up by prayer; or “God, if you help me out, I’ll serve you.” Then the help comes and the vow is forgotten.

Maybe just as seriously, this way of “speaking” feeds into “settled views” about God and others. These are really premature judgements meant to protect us from how much we *don’t* know. To “draw near to listen” is the opposite of already “knowing the truth with certainty.”

Of course there are many things we do *know*. The way of God and Christ is not opposed to knowledge. Even so it seems more appropriate to our station to couch our language in terms of trust and faith. *“I believe that oppression is evil, I believe that live this breath-like existence for mere “gain” is foolish. I believe that God is steadfast love and that God is eternally present.*”

None of these basic levels of trust or belief is overly restrictive; they don’t shut me off from learning more, from opening to God speaking to me, they don’t over define God or partnership while at the same time giving me a basic structure in line with my emerging understanding.

The third glitch, or thorn that chokes off growth is **“dreaming.”** “With many dreams come vanities” says Qohelet. We talk about “dream jobs,” our “dream home/house” our “dream vacation.” We dream of winning the lottery and we give money to the “fulfill a wish foundation.”

Though dreams factor into our faith, both our literal dreams and imaginative dreaming, most of our dreaming is an escapist coping mechanism that is actually and avoidance of reality, as such, it’s mere “wish upon a star daydreaming” and it’s profoundly counter-productive.

Even the original “American Dream,” an idea coined in 1931 was not so much about magically acquired “dream jobs” or “dream houses” but a dream of equality, justice and democracy. It was only after WWII that advertisers were all too happy to latch onto to it as a pitch for “gain.”

Most of our “dreaming” is connected to “escape” or “wealth” or “pleasure;” not Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” which was about bending the moral arc of the universe closer to justice.

It’s instructive to ask **what do you daydream about? Write it down.** When I’m under stress I dream of “a worry free life,” I dream of having “no responsibilities.” When I’m in a place of understanding I can recognize that this fantasy, if played out, would take me out of what I’m made for: partnership with God. But when I’m under the sway of the siren songs of our culture I imagine my daydream has the taste of “freedom” to it.

Escapist dreams manifest uniquely in each of us. Ultimately, they rob us of energy; they seduce us away from reality.

Okay, so what’s the remedy to the “birds,” the “thorns,” the “glitches?” The first and last word of Jesus’ parable is “listen;” the last phrase of our text from Ecclesiastes: **stand in awe before God**; here I think the NIV’s got a better translation than the NRSV’s “fear God.”

“It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.” -Lisa Simpson in *The Simpsons*

Yes, I get the irony quoting that at the end of my devotional!! But here’s the thing, this pandemic has given us a new opportunity to value silence, silence in God’s world and in God’s presence.

We’re afraid of silence and yet one of the most influential verses in our entire tradition is “Be still and know that I am God” What Rudolph Otto called *The Mysterium Tremendum*, the Holy Mystery. To simply allow ourselves to “be;” to allow our crashing thoughts to still; to still our “performance” and silently adore.

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe!” Amen.