

"Embrace It! Enjoy It! Examine It! Express It!"

(Ecclesiastes 1:1-14; James 4:13-17; Luke 12:16-21)

Warren Schmidt has worked hard all his adult years as an actuary for the Woodmen of the World Insurance Company. On his last day before retirement, he sits at his barren desk in his office with packed boxes against the walls. He watches the clock, watches the last few minutes of his work life tick away. Then he loads up the boxes and drives, in the rain, to a nearby strip-mall steakhouse, where his fellow workers are throwing him a retirement party.

Schmidt wakes up the next morning not quite sure what he is to do with himself. He returns to his office, thinking that perhaps he can help the guy who's taken over his job. But, of course, he discovers that everything that he thought was so important can be done by anyone. Now what?

His wife of 42 years pinched pennies so that they could buy a Winnebago and travel, but sadly, while cleaning the house, she drops dead. Schmidt is really lost. No job. No wife. In his emptiness, in his search for some meaning or purpose to his existence, Schmidt decides to get in the Winnebago and go to Colorado to visit his estranged daughter.

When he arrives, he finds his daughter in the midst of wedding preparations. But Schmidt doesn't like his future son-in-law or his parents. He's appalled by how free-spirited they are. They're just too different. So Schmidt decides that his new purpose in life will be to stop his daughter's wedding.

But Schmidt needs someone to talk to--someone with whom he can share his thoughts. Problem is that his life is not only empty of work, purpose, and people; it's also empty of close personal relationships. So Schmidt begins writing down his thoughts in letters to the six-year-old Tanzanian orphan he began sponsoring for \$22 a month through an organization he saw advertised on TV. Schmidt writes this six-year-old boy who cannot read, and, wonder of wonders, in getting his thoughts down on paper, Schmidt begins to really see himself and the life he has lived. He sees that while trying to run his daughter's life, he's wasted his own.

If perhaps this sounds familiar, it's probably because you saw the movie, "About Schmidt," for which Jack Nicholson received a Best Actor nomination.

Or, perhaps this sad story sounds familiar to you because you're familiar with similar stories in history. Like the story of Alexander the Great, who, as a young man, conquered everything from Greece to India. He dreamed that his power would make peace over all the earth. But at the young age of 33, he sat down and cried because there were no more worlds left to conquer. And within one generation after his death, Alexander's empire was gone. It was as if everything he had done had been in vain.

Or, perhaps the depressing story of a man's empty life may be familiar to you because you've read our Older Testament book for today, Ecclesiastes.

The writer of Ecclesiastes, identified as "the Teacher," sometimes translated "The Preacher," begins by saying, "Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." This is really an Elizabethan English phrase that is better translated, "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" The Teacher, this ancient Schmidt, goes on to say that there is nothing in life that has any lasting worth. The wise and the foolish, the wealthy and the poor, the powerful and the oppressed all end up dead. So what's the point?

One of our literary classics is Faust, and this is pretty much the dilemma of the hero, Dr. Faust, a middle-aged scholar and scientist who has given up hope that he'll ever discover the true meaning of life. Faust is afraid that he'll die with all his wisdom and acclaim without ever experiencing what it means to be truly alive. Thus Faust makes a deal with the devil. In exchange for his soul, Faust wants just one moment on earth that's so fulfilling that he'll exclaim, "Let this moment linger, it is so good."

The devil lets Faust experience everything, reading all the books, speaking all the languages, tasting all the pleasures. The devil gives him wealth, political power, the ability to travel wherever he wants and to be loved by any woman he chooses. Faust has it all and does it all. Nonetheless, he's not happy. He still has that emptiness within himself, that emptiness that the Teacher of Ecclesiastes describes.

Several weeks ago, my aunt suggested that my mother read David Jeremiah's book on Ecclesiastes (Searching For Heaven On Earth). Now at the time, my mother was very depressed. She'd had to leave the house and home she'd lived in for 41 years; she'd had to move from St. Louis to Kansas City; she was in her fourth care facility; and she was still in physical, occupational, and speech therapy. And on top of all this, taking the advice of her sister, she started

reading David Jeremiah's book on Ecclesiastes. I arrived at Mom's apartment one day to find her very agitated. She told me right away how upsetting Ecclesiastes was.

This is indeed the way Ecclesiastes first hits us. "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" But if we stick with it and read all of Ecclesiastes, we discover why it is classified as wisdom literature and why our loving God has given it to us. We even discover encouragement for living our lives, even though "the wise die just like fools" and "all is vanity (meaninglessness) and a chasing after wind" (2:17).

Ecclesiastes tells us that God is in control. There is a plan. Everything has its time. Everyone has his or her time. There's a time to be born, and a time to die. And while we're on this earth, while we have life, we would be wise to **embrace** life. This means that we would be wise to understand that life and all of its blessings are temporary. And realizing this, perhaps we won't so carelessly let precious moments and blessings pass unnoticed and unappreciated.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters have the holiday of Succoth. Succoth began as a harvest festival, similar to our Thanksgiving. Devout Jews celebrate Succoth in the fall by building a small addition, really just a few boards covered with branches, onto their homes. They invite their friends to join them in it to eat some fruit and drink some wine. Succoth though is not just a harvest celebration; it's a celebration of things that do not last in a little hut that does not last. The season will change. Winter will come, and the wind will blow the flimsy shelter to the ground. The fruits of autumn will spoil if not eaten quickly. The friends of autumn (who come to eat and drink) may not be with us as long as we might like. The blessings we have, foods, friends, sunrises, sunsets, precious moments in time, are to be embraced while we have them, for they will not last. So we need to be attentive to what we have. (Collected Sermons, William A. Ritter, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 0-000-2300)

And besides embracing life, we would be wise to fully **enjoy** it. As Ecclesiastes tells us, "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart. Enjoy happiness with someone you love. Whatever is in your power to do, do it with all your might. Be content in your work. Cast worry from your heart. Enjoy your years, however many there may be...." (9:7ff).

In January of 1984, the late Senator Paul Tsongas announced to the people of Massachusetts that he would not stand for reelection to the Senate. Now at the

time, he was a rising star. People were often heard to link the words "Tsongas" and "White House" in the same conversation. But Paul Tsongas announced, "A few weeks ago, I learned I had a form of lymphatic cancer that could, if I was careful, be contained but not cured. It has forced me to consider that there are some things I would rather do than write my country's laws or get my name in history books...things like watching my children grow up." After this announcement, a friend spoke with him about how difficult his decision must have been. But Paul Tsongas answered, "It was only a difficult decision until I realized I had never heard anybody say on their deathbed that they wished they had spent more time at the office." Paul Tsongas wisely chose to enjoy the time he had left with his children.

Besides encouraging us to embrace and enjoy our lives, Ecclesiastes also encourages us to examine our lives. To study our lives. To learn from them. To, as our Lord himself did, "increase in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and humanity."

A man went for a walk in the forest and got lost. He wandered around for hours trying to find his way back to town, trying one path after another, but none of them led out. Then abruptly he came across another hiker walking through the forest. He cried, "Thank God for another human being. Can you show me the way back to town?" The other man replied, "No, I am lost too. But we can still help each other in this way. We can tell each other which path we have already tried and been disappointed in. That will help us find the one that leads out."

In these mysterious, individual journeys we call our lives, we can learn from one another. We can also learn from God, through prayer, reading our Bibles, communing with nature. We can mature, becoming less greedy, less selfish, less prideful and more loving, kind, and generous. And then we can make our lives a beautiful expression of what we have learned and how we have matured.

Remember the story of Faust, the doctor who made the deal with the devil, who searched everywhere for meaning but could find it nowhere--not in riches, acclaim, beautiful women? Well, at the end of the story, Faust is hard at work building dikes to reclaim land from the sea for people to live on and work on. Instead of being obsessed with finding pleasure and power, Faust is interested in helping people. And with this finally, Faust can exclaim, "Let this moment linger, it is so good."

And remember our friend Schmidt? Let's go back to the ending of that story too. As Schmidt drives home from his daughter's house, we hear a voiceover, another letter to the boy in Tanzania. Schmidt writes about the wedding and how his daughter and son-in-law are on their honeymoon, and that there's nothing he can do about her life anymore. He's depressed that in all his life he hasn't made one bit of difference to anybody, that he hasn't done anything important. He returns home. His house is a mess and, there's a huge pile of mail behind the door. Schmidt gathers it all up and sits down to look through it. He finds a letter from Africa and opens it. It's from a nun who works at the orphanage. The nun explains that Schmidt's adopted boy was sick, but is better now, thanks to the money he sends. She writes that though the boy cannot read or write, he enjoys Schmidt's letters. She has enclosed a drawing the boy made for Schmidt. Schmidt unfolds the folded, enclosed paper. He sees a drawing of two stick figures, one holding hands. One figure is larger than the other. Obviously the drawing represents the boy and him holding hands. Schmidt breaks down and cries, realizing that he indeed has made a difference in somebody's life.

Friends, life on this earth does not last. This is true. But this makes life more precious than it would be otherwise. Let us therefore embrace it, enjoy it, examine it, and express it by making a difference whenever and wherever we can. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; June 13, 2010