

Take Risks. A sermon preached as part of a series on Ecclesiastes at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC on February 12, 2017 by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons: ECCLESIASTES 11:1-6
JOHN 2:1-11

As the Preacher nears the end of his journey, his personal remarks are full of perspective and hope. Here in chapter 11 and in many places in chapters 9-10, the advice takes the form of proverbs – personal, pragmatic and practical advice.

Lots of common sense wisdom in Biblical proverbs.

The counsel and advice here in chapter 11 of Ecclesiastes reminds me of an interview I read some time ago.

The interviewee was an 85 year of woman from the hollers of Kentucky.

She was asked to look back over her life and reflect on what she had learned.

With that touch of wistfulness that inevitably accompanies a statement like “if I had it to do over again...”

She said,

“If I had my life to live over, I would dare to make more mistakes next time.

I would relax.

I would be sillier; I would take fewer things seriously...

I would eat more ice cream and less beans.

I would perhaps have more actual troubles but fewer imaginary ones.

You see, I'm one of those people who lived seriously and sanely hour after hour,

Day after day.

I've been one of those people who never went anyplace without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat and a parachute.

If I had to do it again, I'd travel lighter."

Less wealthy and less well educated than the author of Ecclesiastes, this woman from Kentucky has come to understand how easily the wonder, the pleasures and the joy of this life can be snatched away by worrying about what might happen tomorrow

Or regretting about what happened yesterday.

She realizes that too often she has not taken a risk in life, because she did not have all the answers, and it was never the right time.

She was too afraid and therefore kept putting off what she might like to have done or tried by saying — yes, I will do that when I can afford it,

Or the time is right,

Or when I know better how to do it.

This woman from the hollers of Kentucky would echo Ecclesiastes' counsel and advice in this

morning's reading – it's time to start living or it's time to start dying.

Stretch, reach, take a challenge, and take a risk.

**Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days
you will get it back. (vs.1)**

Or, I still prefer the King James Version of this particular proverb.

**Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after
many days.**

Of course the Preacher is not being literal with his words,

For we know that bread upon the waters will either be eaten by sea birds or fish,

And who really wants back mushy, soggy bread.

So to what is Preacher referring.

Bread upon the waters is a picture of ships loaded with grain, seeking trading partners.

If you don't send the ships out – you will never realize any result – except moldering grain.

But if you do send the ships out, they do run risks of the sea don't they.

The Preacher or Solomon is drawing from his own experience – as a wealthy man – Solomon built his wealth on taking a risk at times – not waiting for the perfect time.

Grain was important in the Biblical world – it was a prize possession to have and use--for bread among other things.

If we move the proverb out of the Biblical world, I believe the bread here in vs 1 could mean the prize possessions we have. It could be money, it could be stuff, it could be time – some of the items in our lives that we value.

Therefore when the Preacher says, cast your bread upon the waters – take a risk with things that are prized by you.

Do not let them sit moldering like grain in a storage barn.

Cast them, send them out.

The specifics of how are not given in Ecclesiastes and I think we are only limited by our imaginations as to the how.

What is important says the Preacher is that we not tightly hold to them; hoard them, save them all “for good”.

Let me tell you about two letters I received in the course of a limited renovation and organ installation project in one of the two churches I served in New Brunswick.

Both became lifelong object lessons in the validity and undeniable truth of the Preacher’s words in vs 1.

The first letter came from a former clerk of Session from of my home church to whom I had written outlining the project, with special emphasis on the organ. And I had included an SASE if he and his wife felt so inclined.

Well, the envelope came back with a quite generous gift toward the organ installation.

But more significant was the accompanying letter from Jim, the former Clerk.

He began by saying how delighted he and his wife Evelyn were to hear the news of the work in Sackville and how Katharine and I were faring. Delighted to hear about Ruth's birth and thriving.

Then he went on to say, the gift he was sending was a thanksgiving for the kindness of my grandparents to him, his wife and small family when they moved into the city in 1946.

As they did not have a car, they relied on others for rides

And as they lived on the then outskirts of the city which had no public transit, they either walked or did not go.

St. Andrew's is downtown and the distance from their house to the church was just short of two miles – too long in bad weather to push a stroller.

My grandparents picked the family up every Sunday for church and then dropped them back home after church.

Many of those Sundays continued Jim we were invited to a Sunday noon meal and sent home with extra food.

So, Jim continued, see this gift to you Herb as "a return of the bread cast by your grandparents"

The other letter was from the family who lived in the house next to the church in Sackville.

This family was Jewish, so we would not have expected them to be involved in the life and work of the congregation.

However, early in the fund raising campaign we received a letter from the family.

Again, a generous donation. What for many of us was more significant was the reason the family gave us the donation.

Certainly they said in the letter it was owing to be good neighbors.

But the letter went on to tell us that when the Halifax explosion happened in December 1917, the Jewish synagogue in the city was levelled.

There was no money to rebuild, as many of the congregation had either died in the explosion, or were severely injured or had themselves lost everything.

It was the Halifax Presbyterians who generously loaned the congregation money to build a new synagogue.

The letter concluded along the following words – it seems only right and proper that as Jews, we should return the bread that the 1917 Haligoanian Presbyterians gave to the synagogue.

Then it closed with citing the Ecclesiastes 11:1.

Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.

The morning the letter was read to the congregation, there were more than a few stunned and amazed looks and tears.

As I said moments ago, these two experiences leave no doubt in my mind about the truth of Ecclesiastes' counsel.

It made me eager in a new way and aware in a new way to see God working things out in his time and his plan.

It also reminded me that the plans of God are big and broad – kairos time!

For this casting of bread – this taking a risk with that which is precious in our lives is not an in/out process.

43 and 72 years respectively before the cast bread came back

Further, when it came back, it did not come back to the people who cast it – my grandparents were dead by the time Jim wrote the letter to me in 1989 and the gift from the next door neighbours of St. Andrew's in Sackville did not go back to St. David's Halifax.

But come back the bread cast did----

Proving that any good deed, generosity done in God's name is never forgotten by God – ever.

Also proving that you take this sort of risk because it is a reflection of the generosity of God in your life. You do not do this to “get something” back.

You do it because it is the right thing to do!!

Verses 2 and 3 are also proverbial in form

Yet they carry a punch in how to live a life that matters.

Don't hoard your possessions. The number of seven or even 8 in verse 2 is a literary device that loses some of its impact when translated from Hebrew. What it means is *Be liberal and generous, to as MANY as you can and THEN SOME!*

Do not wait until you have enough before you give, because if that is the case, you will never give.

Vs. 3 –picks up images from the natural world.

No one knows when the rain will come or precisely where the tree will fall – yes?

Then stop spending all your time and your energy worrying about the what might be's or the what could be's or the what if's.

Many people do just that – the result being they mortgage the present, for fear about the future or regret about the past.

Such people are not really living – they are just going through the motions that look as if they are alive.

Fears of the future, regrets about the past are not the way to live a life that matters!!

You all know that serenity prayer repeated at every meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous
Well you do not have to be an alcoholic to pray and try to live out daily the prayer.

Good common sense perspective in this prayer

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know
the difference.*

Vs 5-6 – more images of the risks of waiting until everything is right and perfect before you yourself take a risk in this life.

Farmers who wait for the most opportune moment to plant, when there is no wind to blow away the seed,

And to reap when there is no chance of rain for several days to ruin a ripe harvest, the farmer will never do anything but sit around and wait for the right moment.

The seed will remain in the barn.

The result will be moldy seed and no grain to sell.

In a similar way,

If we wait until us “have time” do so something we never will.

If we wait until we are “less busy” or until we think it is the right moment, we will do nothing.

For little voices will most assuredly whisper in our ears, “Oh, I don’t know about that? Should you do

that right now? Can you afford it? Do you have the time? What will others think?

Nowhere is the Preacher encouraging wasteful actions, or unconsidered decisions.

What he is saying all along is that:

--we live in an uncertain world

--none of us will live forever.

--do not let your fears of the what might be's condition all of your decisions to take a risk in this life.

--do not wait until "everything is right" before taking action. Because then you will be waiting an awful long time

Life is unpredictable – you cannot plan for every eventuality.

And you may be missing out on lessons and help God wants to give to you and show you as you take a risk.

Don't allow circumstances to keep you from hoping – even following a dream.

If God wants you to follow that dream – he will help you along the way.

If God of course does not want you to follow that dream take that risk, then he will tell you this as well.

But at least you can never say in later life, I wish I had tried, but I was too scared, too uncertain, and I thought I would have more time.

- Start living, the Preacher tells his readers – then and now. Do not allow the fears of the future or the regrets of the past constantly determine your living in the here and now.
- Be generous with what you have, for this is a reflection of the God who is already lavishly generous with you.
- Take a risk once in a while – For what are you waiting? AMEN