



SUNDAY MORNING SERMON

Wolfgang Raupach-Rudnick

Never ist the ear filled with hearing!

Vanity, says the Teacher, all things are vanity, hot air, chasing after wind – there is nothing new under the sun. (1:2.9)

I often think Ecclesiastes or the Preacher (Qoheleth) is the most modern among the biblical authors; sometimes he is shockingly matter-of-fact. This Preacher lived in a time that had become complex. He shares that much with us. He, too, sought orientation when the old values had become questionable. The Preacher asks: what will genuinely endure? Will knowledge and education endure? Does the favor of others last? And he asks, radically: what is happiness, really?

We live in a time of great change. For the past two or three generations we have witnessed a fundamental change in society. In the newspapers, expressions such as society of surplus, value change, individualization, sensation-seeking society proliferate. However appropriate these expressions may be, one thing is apparent: Our life unfolds differently from that of our parents in the forties and fifties of the twentieth century or from that of our grandparents at the beginning of that century.

The old society was a society of scarcity. Their questions were quite elementary and existential: How can I be fed this evening? Do I have a roof over my head? Where can I get winter boots for the children? Happiness, if they asked about it at all, was something that was determined by concrete goals and that lay in the future: a job that guaranteed enough income, a penny put aside for emergencies, a home with water and an inside toilet, to be respected as a proper member of the society. "The children should have it better" was one of their mottoes.

Since then, much has changed. The standard of living and the chances for education have increased. Technical progress has opened free spaces, leisure time has grown longer: Just think of the washing machine, which has replaced grandmother's arduous, long washday. The number of products has increased; their utility however has remained the same. Any soap at all will clean me, but I can – and must – choose among fifty brands in the supermarket. I have to choose constantly. What goes for consumption also applies to the opportunities for leisure, it applies to my choice of profession, to the choice of where I live, to the choice of a partner for life, to the wish for children – nothing is preordained, nothing is determined. Hurdles and barriers of earlier times have fallen. Happily!

Happily? The many new possibilities and freedoms result in our constantly having to make a choice – whether we want to or not. “What should we do this weekend?” – Even in my childhood the question made no sense. Father worked Saturdays until 6 pm, going to the movies with Mother in the evening, a walk on Sunday – that was all, there was no more. “Let’s go shopping!” For my grandmother not only the word would have seemed strange. You went to the druggist, because you needed a package of soap powder, or you travelled one or two times a year to the county seat for a pair of shoes or a new coat. And the purpose was the coat, for which you had saved for a long time and which had to be warm and last a long time. Going shopping – that means that I have enough time to spare and enough money to buy something, even if it is not completely necessary. Shopping promises a sensation that goes beyond that of simply making a purchase.

Today we are looking for experiences and in doing so we can choose among many, many possibilities, but we find ourselves in a dilemma. With every choice I make, I myself am responsible for the result. Whether the feeling of happiness I hoped for really appears, is something I cannot know in advance. I alone am responsible for my happiness and for my failure, too. Nobody makes the choice for me. But how can I make the right choice when the danger is great that the life of happiness I hope for doesn’t result? Making choices is a risk as well and it can put someone under considerable pressure. Many people complain about this and wish that the good old simplicity and clarity would return – as in the old times, when the world was less complex and everyone knew what was expected, what should be done and what one wanted to do: apprenticeship and a life spent in the same profession, a family, income and enough to get by on, a certain prosperity.

That is exactly the situation of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher. He, too, is seeking orientation in a time that has become complex, one in which the old values have become questionable. Formerly, before Ecclesiastes, people had asked: What must a person do in order to be happy? What happiness was, was clear. Happiness was health, a long life, a large number of descendants, wealth and honour. People used to say: A person can achieve this kind of happiness through effort; he only has to obey the rules, rules like: “*A slack hand causes poverty.*” “*A child who gathers in summer is prudent,*” (Proverbs 10:4.5) These are words that my grandmother could have said. Today these rules no longer fit. Even the diligent can fail if they choose the wrong profession. I know several people who began their studies at the end of the 1970s, who were diligent, and who nevertheless have to support themselves with temporary jobs.

For Ecclesiastes the former security has also become fragile. For that reason he examines the old values critically, examines all gains and all the goods obtained. “*I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees ... I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold ... singers, both men and women, ... many concubines.*” All this he weighs and has to conclude: “*Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.*” (2:11) “*... they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands ... What gain do they have from toiling for the wind?*” (5,16) The value of the material goods is not enduring and it is ambiguous. Not only poverty but wealth can call forth worries and sleepless nights.

Which is why Ecclesiastes asks questions that are different – more modern, more basic. He no longer asks: What values must I have in order to be happy? He asks instead: What is happiness and what is happiness based on? “*I said to myself, ‘Come now, I will make a test of pleasure: enjoy yourself.’ But this also was vanity.*” (2,1) Is happiness perhaps the happy sensation experienced when possessions and wealth no longer need to guarantee happiness? But even that experience does not last. If everything depends on that experience, then I want to repeat the lovely experience, even intensify it. What is worthwhile leads to accumulation, and with that to its own inflation and devaluation. Already, at the moment of fulfillment the question arises, what is going to

come next. People journey to far places only to ask themselves, when they have barely reached their destination, where the next trip should go. Added to fear of boredom comes the fear of missing something. Couldn't it be that another television program is better? – and so we surf the channels. Or perhaps another person would have more to offer, compared to the one I have chosen.

Ecclesiastes comes to the conclusion: I cannot make happiness, it comes to me. "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God." (2,24) Happiness is a gift of God.

At this point I would like to talk to Ecclesiastes directly and to ask him: So you mean, I may enjoy my moments of happiness – conscious of the fact that they were given to me and are a gift of God? Yes, he would certainly say: Enjoy your happiness and do not gaze into the future, it is unreliable. You are a mortal being and cannot delve into the plans of God. Enjoy the moment! Every moment has its own value! *"A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains for ever. The sun rises and the sun goes down and hurries to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes round to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full ... The eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing."* (1,4ff) Enjoy the moment for its own worth. Then you will be free to do your daily work. *"Whoever observes the wind will not sow; and whoever regards the clouds will not reap. Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything. In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good."*

Do something for itself – and enjoy it. For the goods that one may acquire, or the feeling of happiness which may come, is vanity, not lasting. What comes after that is something humans cannot decide.

Amen.

Translation: Mary Heidhues

Gefördert durch:



aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages