

“Smoke and Spitting into the Wind”

Rev. Dr. Luran Miller-Purrenhage

Sunday, August 18, 2019

Please pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, oh God, our rock and our redeemer.

“I hate life. As far as I can see, what happens on earth is a bad business. It’s smoke—and spitting into the wind.” This is a pretty startling and evocative metaphor, isn’t it? Life, and everything we do in life, is smoke and spitting into the wind. Now the translator of the Message seems to me to be taking some liberties with the original Hebrew here. We might better translate what the Message calls “smoke” as “vapor,” or maybe as “breath,” or “air.” And we might translate “spitting into the wind,” as “striving after the wind,” or “grasping at” or “longing for” “the wind,” or “breath.” You might know this phrase as, “life is vanity, and striving after the wind.”

These phrases don’t have the same connotation as “spitting into the wind,” but I chose the Message translation for today’s reading because I think it best describes the pure anguish and disgust that the speaker of this book is trying to convey. It’s bad enough to say that life is smoke or vapor, but then to go on to suggest that all we do when we live and work in this world is just the same as spitting into the wind...this language makes us see and almost feel what the speaker is trying to convey. You know what happens when you spit into the wind: it just comes back and splats all over your face. Spitting into the wind is not only useless, it’s offensively self-destructive. Why would anyone do such a thing? And what a thing to say about life! What on earth could have driven him to say, or to *believe* such a thing?

The speaker of Ecclesiastes, the Message calls him “The Quester,” captures a profound and terrible sense of the transience of life and of everything that we do in it. “I can’t take my life’s work or any of my accomplishments with me,” cries the Quester. In fact, I can’t even guarantee that whoever comes after me will use my life’s work wisely. So what’s the point of life!? At some point in our lives, maybe more than once, almost all of us wrestle with this terrifying existential question.

It’s important to note that there are various versions of this question and these versions arise from very distinct circumstances. I say this because it can be necessary to deal with this question, this sense of despair, more than once in life, depending on what brings it up, and the answers we found the first time around may not suffice the next time. For example, in the passages listed in today’s reading, The Quester seems most concerned about his accomplishments and accumulations. So he’s accumulated a certain amount of wealth and material possessions and he realizes that, since he will die and can’t take them with him, accumulating these things was useless. This is pretty close to the message suggested by the parable of the rich fool that we read about in Luke for today. This is one version of despair, but it can often propel us towards better action. If I accumulate a bunch of money, I might then decide that the way to leave a lasting impression is to do something good and productive with that money, like use it to make social change or provide vaccinations for people who can’t afford healthcare.

But the other thing bothering the Quester here is more insidious and difficult to deal with. He is afraid that even his accomplishments are ephemeral and useless. That work he

did to propel social change was not enough or those vaccinations didn't wipe out the disease. So what good did he do?

I've seen this more insidious despair a lot recently and it seems to particularly affect social workers, pastors, and folks working on social justice issues. It also seems to be affecting our teens. It seems an endemic attitude among people I speak to in Flint. One woman I talked with, we'll call her Mary, has devoted her life to living out her faith by serving Flint. Her goal was to help transform Flint to a safer, more vital place to live, to help heal the community. She told me recently that she's worked hard for 15 years, sure that if she just followed her calling, she would make a difference. "But Laura," she said, "I don't think I *have* made a difference. I think Flint is worse than it was when I started." I heard her words echoed in our scripture reading today, "everything is smoke, and spitting into the wind."

What do we do when we're confronted by the enormity of a social evil or when it seems to us that everything we've done to stop that evil has failed—when gun violence continues, despite our protests and activism, when racism and white supremacy seems to be making a comeback all these years after the Civil Rights movement and after all the lessons we have learned from the Holocaust, when the candidate we've worked so hard to get elected loses, when the bill we've struggled to get passed is vetoed? Or, perhaps worse, what do we do when we win: when have successful anti-racism discussions, when our candidate does get elected, or the bill passes, or the school remains open, but we then realize that this thing that we did didn't make that much of a difference? It was only one anti-racism discussion. Maybe our candidate didn't do what we thought they would do. Maybe others will repeal the bill we put through or maybe it wasn't as effective as we had thought it would be. Maybe someone else will get elected next time around, the school might be closed next year or its programs transformed into something unrecognizable? This kind of despair, *this* kind, I think, is much more difficult to deal with than the concern that I can't take my material goods with me when I die, because *this* despair really gets to the heart of my identity.

I want to know that something I did was of value, and I want to know that I can contribute to the betterment of this earth. If I can't, then what's the point of me? And if no one can, then what's the point of life?

The book of Ecclesiastes does not offer any simple answers to these questions because no simple answers exist. When confronted with the questions that most affect our identity and our faith, the only answers that ring true are the ones that we find ourselves; they have to be found by us through pain wrenching soul-searching, through our own reading, through discussions with friends that we initiate, or through meditation, prayer, and sitting and staring at the stars at night. Nevertheless, it can be helpful to hear what others have discovered through this process, so I'll share with you my thoughts.

Noted biblical scholar, Ellen Davis, states that, more than anything else, this book is about humility. We can probably immediately see one way that her conclusion is correct. If I arrive at the understanding that everything I do is smoke and spitting into the wind, I'm probably feeling a profound humility. But I would go one step further and examine the question of identity that this book discusses. Just a second ago, I said that the questions this book asks are so troubling because I need to know that I have made a lasting difference on this earth. My sense of self depends on this. But if I'm really thinking through the questions posed by this text, I will now ask this: Why is it that I think that me and my work need to

last? Why do I have to make a lasting difference? Why do I think that my value lies in the long-term effects of what I do? Both the book of Ecclesiastes and the parable we read today from Luke confront us with these shocking questions by asking us to consider where our value really lies.

In Luke, Jesus tells us a story of the Rich Fool. In it, a man plans to spend time, money, and resources to make himself bigger barns to store his excess grain. His goal is to be able to eat, drink, and be merry after he's done all this hard work. Defying all of our economic sensibilities (and, I will say, even defying the good example of Joseph when he helps the Egyptians create a storage system for their excess food), Jesus calls this man a fool because he wasn't going to be able to bring his plans to fruition. He was going to die that night. This man, says Jesus, lived for himself, instead of for God. In other words, this man made his plans based on what he wanted for himself, instead of using the excess grain to, for example, feed the hungry.

Another way to look at this parable is to note that this man lacked humility. He put himself before his hungry neighbors, and even before the demands of his faith which include, if he was practicing his faith, to feed the hungry.

But what if the man had taken all his extra grain and given it away to the hungry? What if he did that and then looked around and saw that there were many, many people who he hadn't been able to feed? What if he then asked the question that Mary asked me or that the Quaker asks in Ecclesiastes: Did anything I did make a difference? There are still hungry people. In fact, once this man's grain runs out, people might end up being hungry again. So he helped people today, but not tomorrow. He might very well think that everything he did was smoke and spitting into the wind.

This is where I think humility comes in. Why would this man think he had failed or that what he did had no value if the effects didn't last? Why does *his* work have to last in order for him to think of it than anything other than smoke?

I have another friend in Flint whose name is also Laura. Laura has been working on the water issues for years and, because of her intense involvement, has been asked to speak at our university several times. In each of her speeches, she has quoted the Talmud: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's griefs. Do justly, now. Love kindness, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

"You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." To me, this part of the Talmud is key to really understanding what humility is. Real humility recognizes that the enormous problems of our world cannot be solved by one individual alone. I absolutely cannot finish this work and so my impact on the world probably won't be large. At least, 100 years from now, when people look back at the work I was doing, they probably won't be able to say that I was one of the people doing it. They won't name me or know my name. But does that really matter? What matters is that I did not abandon that work. I did a small part of it and the work got done.

Maybe more importantly is the second part of this passage: "neither are you free to abandon it." The Talmud tells us that we are not free. In other words, we are so much a part of the universe, so much disciples of Jesus that we have a responsibility that we cannot ignore, even in the face of overwhelming odds and even in the face of the possibility of failure. And we are not free of this responsibility because we are not our own; we are God's.

The good news of the parable of Luke and the good news that we find if we read more of Ecclesiastes is that who we are and what we do doesn't have to last, nor does the impact have to be large. We are already part of something much bigger, much more vast, and much more beautiful than our own experiences or accomplishments. We are a dot, in a gorgeous painting. And once we gain this sense of humility, we can stop worrying that the work is taking a long time or that there might be back-lashes against our work, and refocus back on the immediate effects. In other words, humility can help us live in the now, and living in the now will open our eyes up to positive effects of even the smallest of our actions. What we had thought of as smoke—meaning, we thought it was ephemeral and, therefore, useless, turns out to be more like smoke-signals—meaning ephemeral, but highly useful. Let me give you an example from my experiences in Pine Ridge.

Jerry has worked for Re-Member since the organization began, and he told me a story that he cannot shake. One day, he and his work crew went out to a woman's trailer to build her a new ramp. Her current one was broken and, since she had to use a walker, she was generally home-bound, unless someone came and helped her out of her home. Oddly, she wasn't home when Jerry and this team got there. Before working, they noticed that the house was surrounded by high grass and weeds. Since this can be dangerous on Pine Ridge, where rattle snakes and other creatures hide in that kind of grass, Jerry and his group mowed around the trailer. Then they spent a few hours building the deck and ramp. They finished just as the woman arrived home. She invited them in for tea and cookies, and thanked them profusely for the work they'd done. She went on to apologize for not having been there when Jerry and his crew arrived. "You see," she said, "my son committed suicide and his funeral was today." Then, after looking around into the shocked silence her announcement had produced, she looked Jerry in the eyes and said, "No one has ever done anything like this for me before. No one. This is the best day of my life!" And she meant it.

After telling me this story, Jerry just stared at me, wide-eyed still after all the years he's been telling this story. "Her son had died, she had just got back from the funeral, but this was the best day of her life because someone showed her that she was loved. All we did was a couple of hours of work, but it gave her such hope that *that* kind of day became the best day of her life."

Jerry knows perfectly well that the large social problems at Pine Ridge are only a little better since Re-Member started working there. He knows that he could get to the end of his life, and the racism, unemployment rate, depression rate, etc. may have only decreased by small amounts. But that doesn't matter to Jerry because what he does there isn't about him or the size of his impact. His humility allows him to see that he is part of something bigger, a network of people committed to improving relationships on the reservation. He is part of something even bigger than that, as a beloved child of God, trying to live out God's command to love our neighbors as ourselves. As a little dot in the larger painting of God's canvas, his little works combine with others to make a larger work. He sees his work not as empty smoke, but as smoke signals, signaling love in tiny little bursts to whoever he meets. Maybe more profoundly to Jerry, he doesn't need his work to be anything other than smoke signals because once, after doing only a half-day's work, he gave a woman whose son had died hope. Amen.