

The Blessings of Nay-saying

I was struck by this comment by a Middle Eastern scholar, which I read last week:

I have often argued that one of the redemptive graces of Western civilization is self-criticism, a deeply engrained habit that has enabled Western man to reflect, to adjust, to improve his beliefs, to correct and change his situation—in short, to reform. The west has been able to submit even its most cherished beliefs to scrutiny. By contrast, self-criticism remains an elusive goal in [other cultures]. One scholar argues that the acquisition of honor, pride, dignity, respect and, in contrast, the avoidance of shame, disgrace, and humiliation are keys to the motivation of many peoples around the world. Codes of honor or shame enforce conformity in behavior. Where it is impossible to admit that one is wrong, to bring shame to family or country or religion, Western-style satire or dissent would be very difficult. This is because humiliation is the worst imaginable affront.

I read these remarks and my mind drifted back to my experience in 2000 of going to Long Beach, California to the Presbyterian General Assembly—which is like a church-wide annual convention. My friend and roommate, Tim Shapiro, knew of two other ministers whose churches sent them every year to the General Assembly even though they weren't delegates. These two characters—both accomplished Presbyterian pastors—had found an array of ways to have a grand time at the General Assembly. Every time we bumped into them—whether at the socials or restaurants or in the evenings when the business had concluded—we found ourselves in uproarious laughter. These two clowns had a delightful way of putting a little pin prick into all the pomp and puffery; all the self-important people, all the crusaders and combatants of the General Assembly. Now someone might say, "That doesn't sound like the kind of attitude ministers should have, especially at our denomination's annual meeting." That may be true. But they helped me have a good experience and all the heaviness of what could easily become an incredibly self-important gathering was nicely lifted.

One of the refreshing things about the Bible and biblical faith is its capacity for self-criticism in a number of ways. There are books of the Bible that are criticisms of other books in the bible. Further, the Bible has virtually no heroes—people

who are perfect examples. Everyone in the Bible with the exception of Jesus is flawed. Think of Jewish humor. Someone offered that laughter is the principle form of Jewish spirituality. So, maybe it's the Bible that gives the Western world its capacity for self-critique.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is in this category. Ecclesiastes isn't exactly comedy. But it has attitude. It's the attitude of someone whose been around and been successful, and who is saying that a lot of things aren't what they're cracked up to be. Money and success are a lot less glamorous than people without money or success may think. Wisdom and education are the same way. So is beauty and prestige. Even religion has a haunting way of not being fulfilling even to those who devote themselves to it for a lifetime.

Some people have read Ecclesiastes and concluded that it is teaching that life is senseless and has no meaning. But a wiser read of Ecclesiastes is that no human ultimate concerns are the meaning of life—not success, not stuff, not pleasure, not even righteousness. What remains isn't despair and death. What remains is simply accepting God's gift of life day by day. What remains is loving and being loved by God, day by day. The rest is vanity!

Now why do I tell you these things on Stewardship Sunday, 2010 when our nation's economy is ever so slowly dragging itself back to normal, when people are paying down their debts, and we're trying to get a huge bunch of folks back to work? I believe that Ecclesiastes gives us a wise take on all our consumption and busyness and fascination with all things big—big cars and homes and so on. Wouldn't Ecclesiastes say about our breathless rush to get and spend and have that it will never make us happy? Or about our frenetic busyness or over-consumption of amusements: these will never make us full and whole.

Quite a number of you have been through the Dave Ramsey Financial Peace University course that we've given here on two occasions. There are a lot of money-management gurus out there. But there's something different about Dave Ramsey that has touched a nerve. His big thing isn't getting rich so much as getting out of debt. He says things like drive around in a clunker and eat hot dogs and get a second job and give up the

"gotta have the most and biggest and best attitude" in order to be free of the bondage of the consumer culture and being broke all the time and perpetually owing someone. I see a little Ecclesiastes spirit in Dave Ramsey's counsel.

And here's the point. Once you've simplified by paying off the credit cards and gotten free even of the house mortgage, you can get this—give money away. That's the great point and the great end. You can be generous. The joy of generosity comes when we have the wisdom to set aside all the false gods of the big this and the prestigious that.

Finally this. This is the path Jesus took. Jesus lived in heaven with all the power and bling and the status imaginable. But he set all that aside and came down into this world. Jesus didn't just come into the world to become a king or scholar or millionaire or warrior. Jesus came down to the point of being just a person in an average place. In his simplicity and ordinariness, Jesus lived entirely for others. Everything God gave him was available for the people around. He became poor for our sake so that we might become rich. I think that's where Dave Ramsey would have us go. Ecclesiastes would approve. And Jesus pioneers the way.