

The Lightness of Faith¹

We take our beginning with a tragic news story. One of the investors in Bernard Madoff's gigantic fraudulent pyramid scheme, a French billionaire named Thierry de la Villehuchet, took his own life in New York City a few weeks ago. He had invested one and a half billion dollars with Madoff and upon learning that he and many others had been defrauded decided that life was no longer worth living. Apparently, a life can become completely "about," as we say, money. And without money, life can appear to be not worth the trouble.

I tell you about Villehuchet as a way of introducing today's thought. The depth, extent, and disruption caused by the current economic meltdown shouldn't fool us. What we're going through is not the end of the world. Not by a long shot. And nothing in this mess is worth losing a life over.

Now, you may be thinking that a sermon, which can be boiled down to an obvious cliché like, "it's not the end of the world," "this too will pass," or "don't sweat the small stuff," seems a far distance from the great truths and themes of Christian faith. Shouldn't I be preaching on something a little...grander?

My answer: no. This is grand. There is a certain lightness of life that comes with living as disciples of Jesus Christ. It is because God made and redeemed this world and all

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

of us within it, that we can know that nothing less will ever be ultimately serious. Even we Presbyterians, staunch and serious in most things, capture the lightness of faith in that first point in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "Humanity's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Yes...enjoy!

How does the Apostle Paul put it? Writing from a dank prison cell he pens these words:

I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound, in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4.12ff)

What a strong word for our times!

There's actually a whole book in the Bible that teaches us to not get so enamored with and tangled up in some ultimate concern, some main thing, some over-riding purpose that we fail to simply enjoy God and enjoy God's gift of life. The book is Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is a scandal. Ecclesiastes doesn't seem like the kind of book that you'd find in the Bible because it seems to be teaching lessons that are different from the lessons we expect to be learning in Church and home.

Please listen to this part of the sermon with some generosity. Ecclesiastes is a subtle book. A lot of people read it and conclude that it is saying that nothing matters, everything is garbage. But there is a wiser way to read Ecclesiastes. Let me try to say what that is.

This might help. Those of us who have been around in this life for any time probably know that there are two ways to learn what life is all about. We learn from our religion, the preacher, our parents. They give us the official stuff. We also learn what life is all about unofficially. We learn dark, delicious truths about life in the army, or from friends our mother doesn't know about or approve, or by wandering down roads we don't talk about in church. And we can learn some important things this way. Am I right?

Surprisingly, the Bible gives us some of the unofficial learnings. It's like...you're reading through the Bible and you come to Proverbs. Proverbs is rated G and feels like an elementary school classroom.

Young man, sit up straight and spit out the gum. Listen and take notes. And don't forget I've got a paddle in the corner and when I use it on you, you'll thank me. Now, write this down. Always get up early. Save your money. Learn from successful people, especially your parents. Avoid the wrong kind of women. Fear God. And get to bed by 9:00 p.m.

That's the tone of Proverbs. The next book is Ecclesiastes. Reading it is like walking into a pool hall.

Come on in, where've you been? Have a beer if you want. May as well, you've got nothing better to do. I mean, haven't you figured out that no matter what you do, you know, the stuff we all believed in 20 years ago, all the stuff we learned in Proverbs, is a bunch of hockum. Success, hard work, making your mark, morality. Gimme a break!

What I'm trying to say in this sermon preached in the midst of a huge economic cataclysm, and what I believe Ecclesiastes is saying is actually quite useful and wonderfully wise. What that teaching is to state it quite bluntly is that—despite the screaming headlines and ranting news anchors—the current economic catastrophe is simply the current economic catastrophe.

Back in the mid-1990's as I was working on a degree at Louisville Seminary, one of my classmates was a talented minister and pastoral counselor named Tim. Tim was both very successful and restless with his life. He made a remark that struck me. "I'm in my forties, and I think I'm at the no-more-nonsense stage of life." Tim had done the Church thing, he'd studied human personality development and had helped people. Much of it he found frankly, shallow and not substantial enough to invest the rest of his life in.

Ecclesiastes is a no-more-nonsense stage of life kind of book. It's a book written from the perspective of a successful order person who is willing to look at those oh-so-important goals in life—like success and popularity and the party scene--and conclude that they're not all that wonderful. And in the end, death erases it all anyway. Earn a pile of money and your feckless nephew will inherit it and spend it in short order. Make a big contribution to society and the world will forget you before the earth has settled on your grave. Give your life to a

company and retire. They'll have your replacement sitting in your old chair before your car is out of the parking lot. And they'll be paying him more salary. Live by a moral and ethical code and die at 56, while some swindler marries the homecoming queen and lives to 101. It's not the way it's supposed to work. But it's the way it does in fact work.

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!

Eugene Peterson, author of the Message Bible, has called reading Ecclesiastes more like a bath than a meal. It washes away all that is ultimately nonsense, ultimately hokum and leaves us wonderfully clean and ready for Jesus. Isn't Jesus our day-by-day God who shares life with us and loves us? Ecclesiastes is a marvelous set up for our receiving the gospel.

So what does all of this have to do with the financial meltdown? What would Ecclesiastes say? Well as it turns out, just about every verse in Ecclesiastes speaks to our situation. I opened the book randomly and this popped out: "In the day of

prosperity be joyful, in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other." (Ecclesiastes 8.14)

Back in 410 a.d. Germanic tribes marched through Italy and sacked the city of Rome. By this time, Christians were spread throughout the Roman Empire and were its citizens. Upon hearing the news, the Christians of N. Africa flocked into Bishop Augustine's cathedral in Hippo. The congregation was frightened and grief struck. Augustine stood up and said that the fall of Rome was endurable because Christians are ultimately citizens of a greater empire—the Kingdom of God. God's kingdom would never fall.

So are you and I citizens of a greater kingdom. And on balance, our nation is nowhere near in the trouble Rome faced in Augustine's time. Listen to these wise observations from Richard Florida:

The United States, whatever its flaws, has seldom wasted its crises in the past. On the contrary, it has used them, time and again, to reinvent itself, clearing away the old and making way for the new. Throughout U.S. history, adaptability has been perhaps the best and most quintessential of American attributes. Over the course of the 19th century's Long Depression, the country remade itself from an agricultural power into an industrial one. After the Great Depression, it discovered a new way of living, working, and producing, which contributed to an unprecedented period of mass prosperity. At critical moments, Americans have always looked forward, not back, and surprised the world with our resilience.

What to do?

How about enjoying the hymn we're about to sing? Then enjoy greeting each other as we go our way? Tomorrow, enjoy the crisis that may well be a prelude to something new. All of it is God's gift to you. It's called your life. Thank him for it. Walk with him through it. Enjoy where he takes you. Ecclesiastes would approve.