

“Taking Calvary to Our Community: Bars and Restaurants”

Ecclesiastes 3:9-15

7th in a Nine Week Series by Brian Henderson and Anne Jernberg

Special Interview Guests: Joe Kaplan, owner of *The Bagel Deli* and Jack & Nancy Lohman, owners of *JL Cheers*

French Enlightenment philosopher, Voltaire once wrote: *“Nothing would be more tiresome than eating and drinking if God had not made them a pleasure as well as a necessity.”*¹

We baptists know how to make eating a pleasure. I experienced this yesterday at the Modern Matures picnic as I indulged in fried chicken, pasta salads, jello salads, deviled eggs, brownies, and pies. It was finger-linkin good. Literally! But it wasn't just the food that was pleasurable – it was the company too.

*“We should look for someone to eat and drink with before looking for something to eat and drink.”*² Those are the words of Ancient Greek Philosopher, Epicurus.

And author Madeleine L'Engle, best known for her book, *A Wrinkle in Time*, once said: *“[There's] something I've noticed about food: whenever there's a crisis if you can get people to eating [normally] things*

*get better.”*³

For the writer of Ecclesiastes, eating and drinking is enjoyable and pleasurable but not because anything is going to get better because of it. It's just a way to find reprieve from this hard life...we toil away through our years not knowing how to make sense of our past and not knowing what to anticipate about our future – and so in the meantime...why don't we eat and drink and have a good time?

This is one of those verses of Scripture that makes a great quote when we extract it from its context: *“It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil,”* (3:13). But what reads pretty black and white at first is not so rose-colored when placed in context.

The book of Ecclesiastes begins with, *“Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”* That's the New Revised Standard Version. The New International Version reads, *“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.*

¹ Accessed on 13 August 2011 at <http://www.quote garden.com/food.html>.

² Accessed on 13 August 2011 at http://thinkexist.com/quotation/we_should_look_for_someone_to_eat_and_drink_with/162336.html.

³ Accessed on 13 August 2011 at <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/show/51595>.

‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’” Other translations include: *“Emptiness, emptiness...All is emptiness,”* *“Useless, useless...All is useless,”* *“Futility, futility...All is futile,”* and *“Utterly absurd, utterly absurd...All is utterly absurd.”*⁴

Just reading that first verse is enough to send any preacher to a bar for a drink...or any person for that matter! (Not a baptist, of course...but any other person). It’s the kind of depressing thing that bartenders probably hear frequently (at least in the movies)...someone has a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day and goes to drink himself into oblivion, and a few drinks into his misery, he mumbles, *“Meaningless, useless...All is futile.”*

In those moments, bartenders become pastors in their own right...or therapists...listening to the momentary meaninglessness of another person’s life...their pain, their struggles...their humanity. But – the thing is – inevitably, the sharpness of the pain passes and the meaninglessness of the moment dissipates. Eventually a new day comes and healing begins. At least, that’s the hope, right? That no matter how bad things get...we know that surely they are going to get

⁴ W. Sibley Towner, “The Book of Ecclesiastes: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* Vol. V (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN), 1997, p279.

better...eventually.

That is the foundation of our faith – the temporary is not the eternal...as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *“For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”*⁵ Or as Rudy Antle and David Beatty are reminding us through our forum Bible Study on the letter to the Hebrews: *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*⁶ And we can hold this conviction because as the writer continues, *“we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...”*⁷

But in Ecclesiastes – we aren’t given any motivation for running the race of life with perseverance...because *“all is vain.”* Really? Is that in our Holy Scriptures? (Note to self: never advise someone new to the faith to begin reading the Bible in Ecclesiastes.) In chapter 1, verse 14 the writer laments rather matter-of-factly, *“I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after the wind.”*

It’s no wonder that, as one biblical

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV

⁶ Hebrews 11:1, NRSV

⁷ Hebrews 12:1, NRSV

scholar wrote, “Ecclesiastes has always had its [odd] fans among the original thinkers of the Jewish and Christian communities: skeptics, people with a dark vision of reality, recovering alcoholics. On the whole, however, [many] believers have found [Ecclesiastes] at least baffling and at most wrong headed.”⁸

But this Old Testament scholar, Sibley Towner continues, “[However] This commentary has been written in the conviction that we need to hear the author of Ecclesiastes out. Time and time again one is driven to admit the truth of what Ecclesiastes has to say, even though one might not want to hear it. Here is the most real of the realists of the sacred writers. Here is the Hebrew writer least comfortable with conventional wisdom, and the [one] most willing to challenge unexamined assumptions.”⁹

The writer of Ecclesiastes is a sage of sorts and this book falls into the camp of wisdom literature. Wisdom writers make sense of life based on observation and practical experience.¹⁰ Like all of wisdom literature...the focus is on human nature. And so Ecclesiastes is really a book more about our limited humanity than God’s limitless divinity.

Rabbi and Scholar Robert Gordis

⁸ Towner, p267.

⁹ Ibid., p267.

¹⁰ Ibid., p272, 274.

identifies four themes that are basic to the thought of the writer of Ecclesiastes:

- 1) Human achievement is weak and impermanent.
- 2) The fate of human beings is uncertain.
- 3) Human beings find it impossible to attain to true knowledge and insight into the world.
- 4) The goal of human endeavors needs to be joy, which is the divine imperative.¹¹

Clearly, the fourth theme is the only one that boldly affirms life. The other three only point to the limitations and impossibilities within which human beings live. But deep within human nature is “*an ineradicable desire for happiness*,” planted there by God. To this wisdom writer then, to live a moral life by doing the will of God is to pursue happiness.¹² And “*the capacity to enjoy life is a gift of God alone*.”¹³

So if we are supposed to enjoy our otherwise dismal life – then how do we do it? Well, according to the writer of Ecclesiastes, one major way to do it is “*to eat and drink, and take pleasure in our toil*,” which we heard read today. This is a big theme for him because he mentions it five times: in 2:24, 3:13, 5:18, 8:15, and

¹¹ Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World – A Study of Ecclesiastes* (Schocken: New York, NY) 1987, p252.

¹² Towner, p283.

¹³ Ibid., p298.

9:7...which is my favorite: “Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do.”

Clearly Joe at *The Bagel Deli* and Jack at *JL Cheers* take great joy in what they do as owners of establishments that help people eat, drink, and be merry. *The Bagel Deli*'s website touts that: “[We are] a family-owned and operated deli where people come together for great food and fellowship. The Deli is a great place to meet old friends, and make new ones, while enjoying everything you expect in a traditional deli.”¹⁴

Meeting old friends for fellowship and making new friends as well...that's a good recipe for the church as well. And while *JL Cheers* is not the same *Cheers* as the Boston bar featured on the popular sitcom in the 80's and early 90's, I get the idea from Jack that he, too, has created a place where if you come often enough “everybody knows your name” and “you're always glad you came.”

On the sitcom *Cheers*, you'll remember that Sam Malone, a former baseball star, was the head of a nice little bar where Norm, Cliff, Dr. Frasier and all the other regular customers spent a few hours every day together, talking about their problems, laughing at each other's

¹⁴ Accessed on 14 August 2011 at <http://www.bageldeli.com/>.

flaws, trying to be there when someone else needed them.¹⁵

The theme song of *Cheers* captures the essence of the show well:

Making your way in the world today
takes everything you've got.
Taking a break from all your worries,
sure would help a lot.

Wouldn't you like to get away?

Sometimes you want to go...

Where everybody knows your name,
and they're always glad you came.
You wanna be where you can see,
our troubles are all the same
You wanna be where everybody knows
Your name.

You wanna go where people know,
people are all the same,
You wanna go where everybody knows
your name.¹⁶

The creators of the show decided to have their show take place in a bar because “they liked the idea of a tavern, as it provided a continuous stream of new people arriving, giving them a constant supply of characters.”¹⁷

That's not a bad goal for the church either – to have a continuous stream

¹⁵ Accessed on 13 August 2011 at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083399/>.

¹⁶ Accessed on 13 August 2011 at <http://www.lyricsondemand.com/tvthemes/cheerslyrics.html>.

¹⁷ Accessed on 13 August 2011 at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheers>.

of people keep coming back. And we are all “characters” are we not!? People who eat and drink together, people who talk about their day together, people who laugh together about their flaws, people who try to be there for one another through the ups and downs of life. Perhaps if the writer of Ecclesiastes had a place like Cheers, or rather, a place like Calvary, he wouldn’t have written, “*Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*”

I like how the Old Testament scholar Towner sums up Ecclesiastes: “Within the awful incomprehensibility of the big picture [of life that the writer of Ecclesiastes portrays,] (v14) [he emphasizes that] *God has made a ‘gift’ of the possibility of human happiness. It is a gift made to ‘all’* (v. 13). [He] teaches that ‘joy is God’s great commandment for man.’ When [he] says, ‘Be happy and enjoy...eat and drink and take pleasure’ (v12-13; 2:24), he means that *to accept God’s gift of life is to be obedient to the will of God.*”¹⁸

When I read that...that the gift of human happiness is a gift made for all...and that we are to eat and drink to take this gift in - all I can think about is Jesus. About how he came to this earth and said, “*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,*” (John 10:10). And about

how Jesus gave up his life as the ultimate gift for us all...and before he gave us that gift...he gave us another gift – he shared a meal – asking us to keep sharing that meal together...to keep eating and drinking and remembering him and his love and his life. And that gift – of sharing that meal – of eating and drinking together in remembrance of the Christ who came to give us all abundant and forgiven lives – is for all people.

We gathered around the table of our Lord last week. But we don’t have to wait for the first Sunday of the month to experience fellowship and friendship with one another...we don’t even have to come into this place to experience the love of God and Christ with others. We might just be able to do it around a table at *The Bagel Deli* or *Sparks Coffee House* or *The New York Deli*...or even (gasp) *Starbucks*. And we might just be able to do it by pulling up a barstool at *JL Cheers*. After all, a rabbi, a priest, and a minister walk into a bar once. But the bartender looked at them and said, “*What is this, a joke?*”

Sorry. I couldn’t resist. But it shouldn’t have to be a joke for a rabbi, a priest, a minister, or any one for that matter to walk into a bar. Christ is there too. Christ is everywhere. Christ is in this community. Calvary, Christ is in us. So may we go forth and eat and drink and take pleasure in life – working

¹⁸ Ibid., p307.

hard – but not too hard. As it's been said before, "*May we work to live, not live to work.*"

And even more, "*May we worship in here to serve out there,*" not only by taking the light of Christ to the community - but also by pulling up a chair around a table and joining the Jesus that is present in all of the characters of our community.

Amen.