

“A Time for Everything”
Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
Ecclesiastes Summer Series, July 26th, 2020
John Reutter-Harrah

If you have heard any passage of Scripture from Ecclesiastes, you’ve probably heard this- There is a time for everything under heaven. You might have heard this passage read at a funeral- a time to be born, a time to die. If you are of a certain age, you remember this put to music. I remember The Byrd’s version from 1965, but Pete Seeger wrote it in 1959, the Limelites and Judy Collins had a version of it. When The Byrd’s had their number one single in 1965, it may have really struck a note because the Vietnam War was ramping up: As the lyrics say- A time for peace, I swear it’s not too late!

I used to visit an old farmer from Ohio who had moved out here to Oregon to be close to his son and daughter-in-law. Warren had worked his farm well into his eighties and in his last years on that farm he cared for his wife who had Alzheimer’s. I would go out to visit Warren in the home he lived in, a home for seniors, every couple months, and we’d have conversation and I’d bring him Holy Communion. He sat in his easy chair all day long, because his legs had given out on him.

Warren spent most of his day watching TV. The family would come by and visit, including great-grandchildren. But almost every visit I would get this question- Pastor, why am I still here? I’ve outlived my purpose. I raised my family- they’re all doing well. Why am I still here?

I assume Warren was looking for a clear theological reason. Maybe he wanted me to say, God must have a purpose for you that you have not yet accomplished. But I never said that to Warren. I would say to him, Warren, I believe the reason you are still here is because you have a strong heart. You worked hard all those years on the farm, and your heart just keeps going. He wanted a theological answer, and I gave him a physiological one.

We are continuing our Summer Series on the Book of Ecclesiastes today. Qoholeth, the writer, is trying to make sense out of life, and so he makes an argument here for a natural occurrence of the rhythms of life that are God-ordained. Life has it’s

preordained cycles, just like summer follows Spring. Everything is in God's timing, he says! I have to say I take issue with Ecclesiastes, There is a time to be born, and a time to die. God determines birth and death. When things happen in this world that is by God's design. I have to say I take issue with Ecclesiastes. Is he saying that when a child is hit and killed by a drunk driver, that was God's timing? God needed another four-year-old in heaven? God had planned that out ahead of time?

I do believe people are trying to be kind to a family when they say those things, because maybe it somehow feels better to know that random things don't happen, that there is some overall plan that is being carried out, that God is in his heavens and all is right with the world. But is God really a puppeteer making everything happen?

Jesus is confronted by people in Luke's gospel (chapter 13) who ask, What about those eighteen people who were killed when the tower fell on them? They must have had it coming, right? It must have been their time to die. A time to be born and a time to die. And Jesus says, No, they weren't any worse sinners than anybody else. An awful tragedy happened. But you might want to take that as a wake up call that life can be short and you might want to get your house in order. Can God use the circumstances of life to work transformation in us? Of course. But God allows the freedom of nature and human decisions to take their course.

In the middle of writing this sermon, I received a call from a grandmother telling me the tragic news that her 25-year-old grandson had died in Florida back in June. He was estranged from the family, and it took a while for news to get back to his foster mother. This grandmother is not sure the cause of death, but the death of any 25-year-old is a tragedy. And I did not say to her, Well, there is a time to be born and a time to die. No, but I can say, God weeps with us at the suffering he dealt with in his life, and he is now at peace.

So I will argue with Ecclesiastes here, that everything is predetermined, but I also know that there is mystery in life, and when death happens at times, it feels providential. Those are the times I will say to someone, That sounds like a merciful death. God is always at work in ways that we can only dimly understand. We don't see the whole picture.

But what about these other pairs of opposites Ecclesiastes places before us? There is a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted. There's a time to lay down your roots, and stay a while, and there is a time to pull up your stakes and move on. God planted Susan and me in a situation my first five years of ministry that was very difficult for us, even though there were many blessings there too. And in hindsight, God kept us there, God planted us there, until I had learned the lessons I needed to learn to be a more mature human being and a more effective pastor. At that point it felt like God let us pull up stakes. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what has been planted.

A time to weep, and a time to laugh... There can seasons in life that are emotionally heavy- we're in one of those times now, with the pandemic and racial reckoning going on and the dividedness of our country. This is a season of heaviness, and we need reasons to laugh. But I did tell the Bible study group this week that these polarities drive me crazy, because they are so binary. They are either-or, this or that; weeping or laughter, keeping or throwing away. And so often life seems much more complicated than this-or-that. Life is shades of gray, life can be this and that at the same time. Sometimes my laughing and my weeping come at the same time. Maybe you have been at a funeral where you shed tears as you heard a story that made you laugh about your loved one or friend.

We read the story today of Jesus weeping at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. He gets emotional and angry when he sees the pain that death brings. He weeps when he realizes how death separates us from those we love. We know that God understands our pain and our tears, because God has come so near to us in Jesus, and God within us knows our grief and our joy. A time to weep, a time to laugh.

A time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together. You hope that the farmer who is clearing their field of stones will throw them to the neighboring farmer who is building a rock wall! A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing. I never before this week thought about that in terms of the pandemic...this is a time to refrain from embracing, isn't it? And how wonderful it will be to hug again when a hug is welcome.

A time to keep, and a time to throw away. Some of you know who Marie Kondo is, the Japanese tidying expert. She directs you put all your clothes on the floor in

your bedroom, and then pick up each one and ask, Does this bring me joy? And if it doesn't you give it to Goodwill or the clothing closet, and you let it bless someone else. A time to keep and a time to give away....

A time to keep silence and a time to speak. I don't know about you, but that takes discernment on my part. When do I say something, and when do I hold my tongue? Paul says in Ephesians, Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another... Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for *building up*, as there is need so that your words may give grace to those who hear. If I am going to say something, will it build the other person up? Will it lend grace to the one who hears it? Will it build community?

We taught our kids to ask three questions before they shared something- Is it kind? Is it necessary? And is it true? It may be true, but is it kind? Do I really need to tell my spouse this, or my child? Is it necessary? Am I telling it because I want to feel important? Am I returning tit for tat? A time for silence, and a time to speak.

I also know that I have a tremendous amount of privilege as a white, educated straight male in this country, and I need to keep silent and listen to folks on the edges, folks who have been marginalized. It's my turn to listen.

A time for love, and a time for hate...In Ecclesiastes' time, you loved your friends and relatives, and hated your enemies. Jesus tells us differently. Jesus tells us that it's always time for love, not in a sentimental way, but always-working-for-the-welfare-of-our-neighbor kind of love, even wanting God's best for our enemies. There are things we can hate- racism, oppression, greed, bigotry, but Jesus moves beyond Ecclesiastes to say, When you follow me, you're creating a kingdom where all are welcome, and swords are turned into plowshares, and we love and pray for our enemies.

I'm left thinking about the choices in life when I hear Ecclesiastes. What will we do in this situation? What will we choose today? Is it a time to throw away an old tendency, something we developed from our family of origin, but it doesn't fit anymore and we need to let it go? If it's time to be silent, how can we listen right now to voices on the margins? If it's time to speak, how can we use our voices to be allies in the cause of racial justice?

I heard about a trumpeter and singer and producer in New Orleans named Shamarr Allen. Last week a nine-year-old boy named Devante Bryant was killed in a shooting in New Orleans, and Shamarr has a nine-year-old, and it really came home to him. He decided to start a guns-for-trumpets program. The police department told him they would accept any gun from him, no questions asked. He got the word out to the kids and youth in New Orleans that every young person who gave him a gun would receive a trumpet.

He said this, "Listen, I have a different connection with these kids because I grew up like them. I know what they're going through. I know the type of environment that they're in. And they aren't bad kids. They're just dealt into bad circumstances. They are trying and wanting to do other things, but it's nothing for them to do."

So far, he has collected four guns and given away four trumpets. The first gun he received, and it was fully loaded, came from a little girl. He says, I gave her all the information about where she can get trumpet lessons. I probably saved her situation.

He ran out of trumpets, so he started a fundraiser, and has raised \$10,000. Some people have donated their own trumpets. Little kids making music. Swords into plowshares.

He says, "If I can create those little opportunities for one or two or three of them, they can actually bring that back to their neighborhood and do it all over again."

Ecclesiastes says, There are seasons of life. So here's my question- what season is it? What is it time for? Let me say that it's always time to love. It's always time to listen to our neighbor on the margins. It's always time to do justice. It's about time! Amen.