

## Ordinary Moments of Grace

*“To everything there is a time and a season for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to sow and a time to reap. A time to laugh and a time to cry. A time to mourn and a time to dance.”*

I love the poetry of the Book of Ecclesiastes, especially the poetry of chapter 3.

“To everything there is a time and a season for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to sow and a time to reap. A time to laugh and a time to cry. A time to mourn and a time to dance.”

When I was a teenager, a rock group called the Byrds put music to those words and made a record that became quite popular. I may still have a copy of it stored away somewhere among the relics of my youth. In those days, more of my life lay before me than behind; and it seemed that I had all the time in the world to laugh and love and dance and sing and plant and build. As a Christian, I was proud that a part of the Bible had been turned into such a popular song, and I celebrated the book of Ecclesiastes.

The young man I was then did not hear or could not understand the words in the song about crying and hating and mourning and dying. I didn't hear the fatalism and futility expressed in Ecclesiastes until I was much older. And I don't like that part of the book. I find these words before us today especially troubling. “I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun and understand that all is vanity and chasing after the wind”. Do you hear what the writer is saying with those words? The ancient sage is saying that after he considered all human activity, all our history, all our doings, all our rushing about, all our striving, he concluded that finally it all amounts to nothing... to “vanity and chasing after the wind.” His beautiful words declare that all life is futile and meaningless.

The ancient sage is wrong, but he expresses a sentiment that many other sages and ordinary people have felt and expressed throughout time. In my office I have a copy of a book written by the ancient Chinese sage Lao Tzu; it is called the Tao Te Ching or sometimes just the Tao. It was written at about the same time as the book of Ecclesiastes and reaches a similar conclusion; that finally human striving is a foolish waste of time. That is a dangerous attitude. I bought my copy of the Tao in 1972. I still remember the day I bought it **but not because** I became enlightened on that day – **but because** on the day I bought it, I became the smartest student majoring in Philosophy at VCU – or at least the one with the highest grades. I bought it from the girl whose grades were better than mine, and who would surely have graduated with a higher GPA in Philosophy. But she decided to quit school, go out west somewhere, and join a commune. She was selling all her books, records, posters and trinkets and leaving materialism behind. I gave her the dollar I was planning to spend on lunch for her copy of the Tao. Later that day, when I could have been eating a cheeseburger, I noticed that she had marked one page in the book with a little yellow flower, a buttercup. The passage she marked reads, “Give up learning and put an end to your troubles.”

I hope that isn't the reason she left school; surely she was too smart for that. But sometimes I wonder if she didn't reach the same mistaken fatalistic conclusion that the writer of Ecclesiastes reached, “I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun and understand that all is vanity and chasing after the wind.” The girl and I were not friends, and I can't remember whether she seemed depressed or not the day she sold everything and left learning behind. I was too occupied with my striving to succeed to notice what was going on in her life.

Since then I have often wondered about her, why she dropped out and what became of her. Did she think that life was meaningless? Was she depressed when she decided to quit school? Did she make it to wherever she was going? Did she marry and have a family? Is she happy somewhere? Did she find that there is much joy and meaning in life all around us? Or did she get trapped in some melancholy that colors everything gray and meaningless?

I hope not because though I barely knew her when our young egos bumped up

against one another, I don't like to think about anyone falling for the old lie that life is meaningless and that all our striving amounts to nothing.

It really is a lie. Through the years, I have come to realize that quite the opposite is true; that every day of our lives is packed with meaning and purpose. I have come to see that our lives are full of ordinary moments of grace that fill the world with beauty and laughter and love and life and joy. But sometimes we are so preoccupied with striving for something else that we don't notice those moments because they seem so ordinary and mundane that we fail to recognize them for the miracles they are.

A woman prepares a lunch for her child to take to school. There is nothing unusual or extraordinary about the woman or her child or the act of packing his lunch. She has packed her son's lunch every day since he began going to school. She is glad to do it because she loves her son and she wants him to have a good lunch. She has packed his lunch so often that most mornings she does it with little thought. Oh, sometimes she thinks of him eating his lunch with his friends at school. She imagines him talking and laughing with his friends and comparing his lunch with the lunches other mothers have packed. She imagines him trading bits of food with his friends and maybe sharing with friends who have forgotten theirs or have less. Sometimes she dreams of what her son will become when he finishes school and grows up. She imagines the girl he will marry. She imagines him as a father. She sees herself playing with his children and her grandchildren. She imagines packing lunches for her grandchildren to carry off and share with their friends. She loves her son and packing his lunch is an act of love... but most days she doesn't think much about it. It's routine, it is just something she does every morning before she sends him off to school.

When he comes home she asks him, "How was your day?"

He tells her that it was the best day ever. "We went to hear a new teacher. And such a wise teacher, you should have been there Mom. You would have liked him."

"Is that why you are so late – because of this new teacher?" she asks.

"Yes, but no one wanted him to stop." He answers.

“Well, your father and I were beginning to worry. But never mind; if you were with your teacher, it’s okay. I do wish he would let us know when he is going to keep you so late. I’ll ask your Father to speak to him. Sit down. I have saved some dinner for you.”

“That’s okay, Mom. I have already eaten.”

“What did you eat?” she asks.

He smiles and says, “Leftovers from the lunch you fixed. I shared with everyone there”.

“You did?”

“The new teacher’s name was Jesus. He asked if anyone had any food to share. You taught me to always share so I gave him what I had and he fed everyone on what you prepared.”

She has already heard this story from a neighbor. She says, “I have heard of Jesus. He was sent to us from God. He is a miracle worker.”

Years later, every time the man who grew from the boy tells the story of Jesus feeding the crowd to his children, he tells them that their grandmother was a miracle worker too because every lunch she prepared was prepared with her love and dreams for him. He teaches his children that every day people have the opportunity to perform little miracles of grace. He teaches his children that sharing with another person is a miracle and listening to another person, caring for their families, welcoming strangers, speaking for justice, doing the right thing, helping those who have fallen are miracles. He teaches his children that life is full of miracles of grace every time one person loves another.

Jesus did great things, miraculous things, things that defied the laws of physics, things we cannot duplicate. But his life wasn’t about big miracles, and most of his days were as ordinary as ours, but they were all filled with little miracles of grace. The pattern for our lives

is to be found in his everyday miracles of grace, love, acceptance, kindness, forgiveness, compassion, concern and all the ordinary things he did for his neighbors.

Life is full of meaning. Every act of grace adds meaning to our lives and the life of the universe. And moreover, every act of grace pleases God and so has meaning beyond this world.

I hope the girl who sold me the book discovered that life is full of meaning.

Who knows... maybe she packed lunches for her children and taught them to share their blessings.

All glory to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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