

Work and Pleasure
Ecclesiastes 2:2-11, 18-23

So, what's the secret to fulfillment? Advertisements and commercials present a bewildering range of options. Some tout the excitement that only a muscle car with a V-8 engine can provide. Others insist that you need to look younger, so you should try a certain lotion to smooth your skin and remove wrinkles. Still others say that what you really need is a vacation, so a luxurious cruise through the Caribbean is just the ticket. How can anyone possibly decide?

Of course, with prices rising all around us, perhaps you're more interested in what the investment firms have to say about diversifying your retirement portfolio, or about how to invest in gold. Or maybe you don't have enough money to worry about any of these things, so you pay attention when an online university invites you to enroll in a training program you can complete while you keep working.

But even when the commercials are over, the suggestions keep coming. Singing competitions insist that fame is the most important thing in life, while dating shows feed our desires for the perfect relationship. Athletic competitions can spur us to desire better physical fitness, as we envy the skill and prowess of the participants. Clever comedies imply that laughter is the best way to relieve our tensions at the end of the day. And when we hear the pronouncements of politicians on the news shows, well, who doesn't long for wiser and more virtuous leaders?

So, what's really going to satisfy us, to bring true fulfillment into our lives? Well, we're not the first ones to wonder about this. In fact, today's passage tells us that, about 3000 years ago, King Solomon decided to do an experiment, trying out all sorts of different activities and experiences to see which of them were actually the most meaningful. And even though he lived some 3000 years ago, we should pay careful attention to his conclusions.

For after all, he had the money to do it right. The book of I Kings tells us that he received 666 talents of gold – that amounts to about \$1.2 billion – every single year. And that's just the tribute that came in from foreign countries. He also received tariffs on trade moving through his realm, as well as taxes that were collected from the various regions of his kingdom (see I Kings 10:14-15). And remember – Solomon had no Congress or Parliament telling him what he could or could not do with all that money. He could spend it however he wanted.

Yes, Solomon really did have it all, even by comparison with modern people. He had all the power and all the money anyone could possibly desire. He thus had no real limits on his experiment to determine what really satisfies – he could try as much of anything and everything he wanted, and to the fullest extent possible.

But we need to remember one more thing: Solomon was also the wisest man in the world. So, as he conducted this experiment, verse 9 reminds us that his wisdom stood by him. That means that, even as he indulged in anything that his heart desired, he was able to maximize the amount of fulfillment and meaning that anyone could hope to get out of it. He didn't overdo anything, and he didn't leave anything out.

And that means that, as verse 12 points out, if any of us were to try the same experiment for ourselves, all we could do would be to follow the same trail Solomon has already blazed. No matter what we might think might ultimately make us happy, Solomon could honestly say, "Been there. Done that. Got the T-shirt."

Okay, so what's the secret to fulfillment? What can truly satisfy us? Well, what about laughter? We all know how good it feels to share a joke with friends. And modern physicians tell us that laughter is actually quite good for us: it stimulates circulation and reduces stress. It can even cause the body to produce natural pain relievers. Yes, laughter really can be a great medicine, and Solomon gave it a good try.

He also enjoyed wine. Now remember, we're not talking about him getting falling-down drunk. No, verse 3 insists that he knew just how far to push it, how to have all the pleasant sensations without any of the negative after-effects. And once again, modern doctors seem to approve, telling us that moderate consumption of red wine can boost our "good cholesterol" levels and reduce our risk of blood clots. And Solomon certainly would have had access to the best vintages available.

But he didn't stop there. For in addition to good laughs and a good drink, he plunged into all sorts of good works. Now, we all know how satisfying it can be to complete any sort of project, whether it be a wooden bowl turned on a lathe or a wall that has been freshly smoothed with plaster, or even a sermon that keeps most of the folks awake in church. But most of our projects invariably run up against limitations, from the kind of wood that is available to us, to the amount of time we have to put the finishing touches on a presentation, to the amount of money we have to hire help or purchase materials.

But Solomon didn't have any of those problems. With his power and money, he could build the grandest of palaces and the most expansive of parks filled with the most exotic fruit trees. Even the lack of rainfall in the area couldn't put a damper on his designs, as he could build the most elaborate irrigation systems to keep everything green and lush. He could get all the fun out of work with none of the frustrations.

And he could also limit his work only to the things he wanted to do. For even though Solomon didn't have any of our marvelous modern labor-saving devices, he didn't need them. Remember, as the monarch of an Ancient Near Eastern kingdom, he held absolute power. So, he could have as much leisure as he wanted because, as verse 7 tells us, he had male and female slaves to take all the drudgery out of his life. So, who needs a microwave or washing machine when you have a fully-staffed kitchen and laundry?

And who needs a radio or CD player, YouTube or Sirius XM if your servants include well-trained musicians? Oh yes, just as Solomon's father David had sung and played the harp for King Saul, Solomon had male and female singers, and doubtless numerous instrumentalists as well, to perform for him whenever he desired.

And what about more intimate relationships? Well, in those days, kings were expected to marry princesses from other countries as a way of cementing regional alliances – royal marriages were a principal form of foreign policy. For example, Solomon went so far as to build a special palace for his new wife when he married the daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt (I Kings 7:8).

But power politics doesn't explain all of the 700 wives and 300 concubines Solomon had in his harem (I Kings 11:3). Instead, Solomon loved many of these women, even those who worshipped other gods (I Kings 11:2). And we have to believe that the author of the Song of Solomon knew a lot about the happiness that can come from a truly committed marriage, even as we might question the wisdom of having so many wives at the same time.

So there it is. Solomon put every form of pleasure to the most exacting of tests. Given the immense wealth and power that he already possessed, he tried to please himself with laughter, wine, work, leisure, music and sex. And aren't these the same sorts of things to which so many modern

people continue to devote themselves? Surely, one of these pleasures, or perhaps a combination of many of them, must have been the key to a satisfied, fulfilled life, right?

Yes, Solomon used all the wisdom, the knowledge and understanding that he possessed to maximize the pleasure and satisfaction he could gain from any activity or experience we can imagine. As he summarizes in verse 10, "All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor."

So what did the wisest man in the world conclude, having tested every possible pleasure to the fullest? "All was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun."

How can we understand such a bleak outlook on life? Well, we must first remember the context, the fact that Solomon is limiting his remarks to things that are "under the sun," things that exist in and for this world alone. In other words, it is purely worldly pleasure and creativity and work that have no eternal meaning. And that is because all such things are, by their very nature, temporary.

Now, that's obvious where it comes to laughter. After all, much humor depends on surprise – seeing a clown getting a pie in the face, or hearing the punchline after a great set-up. But the problem with humor is that it is perishable – the joke is funniest the first time you hear it, and you don't laugh at the pratfall when you know it's coming.

But most other pleasures are just as fleeting. The bottle of wine is eventually empty. The morning dawn inevitably ends the night spent with a lover. The choir's last note is drowned out by applause, only to be followed by silence as the concert is over. In this world, even the wealthiest and most powerful man in the world can't prolong time. After all, as we saw in verse 16 last week, sooner or later, everyone will die.

Ah, but what about our work, the fruit of our labor? Surely what we make or build can endure long after we're gone. This sanctuary has stood since 1860 [1886], and it has housed many generations of worshippers. That's true, but we all know how much effort it takes to keep such a beautiful building like this in good repair. So, what would happen if the future members of the congregation decide it's not worth the trouble? What would happen if one day there's no congregation at all to take care of it? Just a glance down the road at the Rodney Presbyterian Church building shows what eventually happens to a sanctuary that no longer has a worshipping congregation to maintain it.

No, even the grandest of institutions sitting upon the firmest of foundations is not immune from the misuse or neglect of future generations, is it? Think about what happened to so many of the colleges and universities that our Presbyterian ancestors established all over this country. Belhaven is still self-consciously Christian, but all too many others have fallen prey to the prevailing fads and preoccupations of modern academia. And given our own history with the PCUSA, we don't have to wonder whether once faithful denominations can slip into the most grievous of errors.

Yes, as Solomon points out, we may labor with all the wisdom, knowledge and skill that we possess, but those who inherit our work didn't earn it, and there's no way we can guarantee they will honor our intentions or even value our efforts. So, it's no wonder he insists that even the greatest of our labors are just as vain, pointless, and empty as the most fleeting of our pleasures – at least, when we leave God out of the picture, when we only consider the things that are under the sun.

But what if we lift our eyes to the Lord, as David did in our responsive reading? Then we have a different perspective, don't we? Instead of the frustration of chasing after worldly happiness that is only temporary, David assures us that at God's "right hand there are pleasures forever" (Psalm 16:11). Instead of the despair we feel at the inability to leave a lasting legacy, David maintains that his heritage

is “goodly,” or beautiful to him (Psalm 16:6). And that’s because, instead of relying on his power or wealth or wisdom to bring him fulfillment, David is completely satisfied with God alone. “The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and my cup,” David says (Psalm 16:5). In fact, in verse 2 he insists that he wants nothing and no one else: “I have no good besides Thee,” he says to God (Psalm 16:2).

For that’s the best news of all: Sanctuaries may come and go, colleges and denominations may fall into heresy, but the Lord, the One Who is and Who was and Who is to come, never changes and never breaks a promise. That’s how we can be sure He will support us (Psalm 16:5), no matter how disappointed we may be in this world. That’s why we can take refuge in Him (Psalm 16:1), and that we will not be shaken (Psalm 16:8), even in the face of death itself. Because the Father did not abandon His Holy One, Jesus Christ, to decay (Psalm 16:10), we can be sure that all who trust in Him will live with Him forever.

So instead of looking to money or power, laughter or leisure, wine or work, music or sex to satisfy us, instead of placing our faith in any of those false gods, let’s look to the Lord alone. For if He alone is our portion, we have everything we could ever want or need.