

What Really Matters, Pt. 1

Trying Everything

Ecclesiastes 1: 1-3; 2: 1-11

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

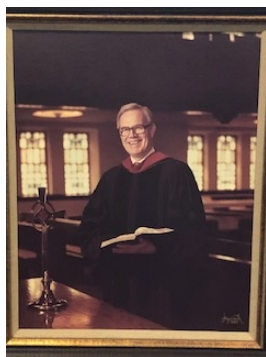
**May 16, AD 2021
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

If you were making up a religion, you'd never include the book of Ecclesiastes in your sacred writings. If your real goal was to control other people through the threats of a mighty God and his moral demands, you'd never include a book that questions all of it. Ecclesiastes is part of the wonderful realism of the Bible. We ask the hard questions. We name the hard realities.



Existentialism was not invented by Camus, Sartre and the rest of the boys in that depressing French band. At least 2500 years earlier, Ecclesiastes declared, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity and a chasing after wind.” Futile, futile, it’s all futility. Everything that seems real is fading so fast it’s like a mist. It all runs away from us.

What’s the point of anything? Those are ideas that come to all of us during our lives. Since everything dies, why even live? Stunningly, naming those haunting questions is not depressing. But freeing. And far from banishing God, this realism welcomes his presence. That’s what we’re after in these three Sundays on Ecclesiastes.

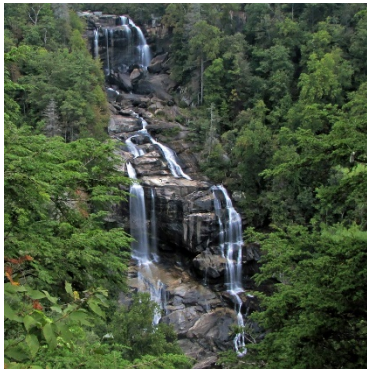


Every Thursday morning in the church library we have what’s called Liturgy Meeting. I gather the worship assistants, the music leaders, the bulletin makers, and the media director. We go over each of our three services to be sure we have all the details right. It’s an important thirty minutes. Well, a couple weeks ago, I noticed a framed picture that was propped up on the floor by a bookcase. The photo showed a smiling man in a pulpit robe standing in our sanctuary. Obviously he had been one of our pastors. But I couldn’t remember which one. I asked the staff if anyone knew who he was. No one did. Thankfully, our former pastor

Russ Stevenson popped by a couple days later. He identified the picture as his predecessor, Rev. Sherrod Rice. Of course.

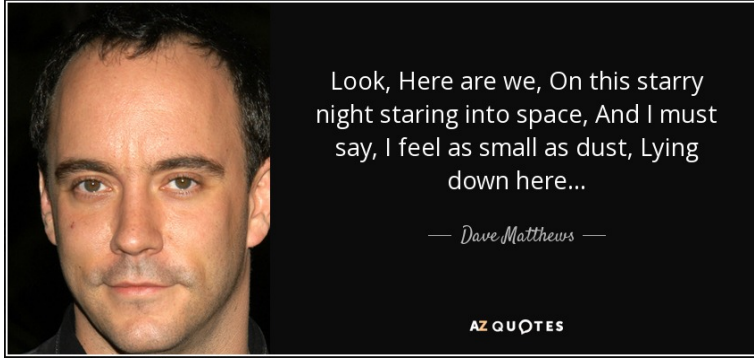
I thought about my beloved staff. They are so energetic, so creative, so earnest in their faith and sincere in their love for our church. They are all self-starters and hard workers. Simply, they're the best. But it struck me, fifty years from now, another staff will be sitting in the library preparing for worship, completely unaware of the names and personalities of any of the pastors or staff working now. One of them might say, "Hey, wasn't there a Dawson Gerrit that preached here in the 20's?" Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. You work your heart out but in a few short years you're an unidentified picture propped on the floor. Now actually, in terms of a 200 year old church, I think that's just fine. What matters is that we run our years of the race with enough faithfulness that the next generations build on it. But personal glory? Not gonna happen, not in business, medicine, art, politics or church work. Whatever you build is left for someone else.

I'll confess to you that I'm prone to the melancholy of realizing how quickly time flies and how life ebbs away. I'm likely to reach for Robert Frost who wrote that our existence is like a waterfall rushing down into nothing:



It seriously, sadly runs away
To fill the abyss' void with emptiness...
The universal cataract of death
That spends to nothingness.¹

In my years, I've thrown a glass or two into the fireplace, tossed a couple of bottles as far as I could fling them when I'm in the grip of passion over the passing of all things into time's void. In such a mood, you might well catch me cranking up Dave Matthews's song "Pig" to full volume:



Look, here are we
On this starry night staring into space
And I must say
I feel as small as dust lying down here
Oh, what point could there be troubling
Head down wondering what will become of me?
Why concern, we cannot see?
But no reason to abandon it
The time is short, time, that's all right
May we'll go out in the middle of the night
Take your hands from your eyes, my love
All good things must come to an end some time, oh
But don't burn the day away
Don't burn the day away.²

That's right, it all runs through our fingers. Time, time is short. But wait, there's no reason to abandon life because it's fleeting. Can't we seize life? Live it fully while there's breath in us? Try everything. Do everything. Find what matters and learn to savor it. That's the quest the speaker in Ecclesiastes set his heart on.

I resonate with that. From very early on I've wanted to discover what makes for real life. The best life. As a guy who gets to write for a living, I've known plenty of difficult struggles with words. But for years number 1 on the list of the hardest thing I ever wrote was the personal essay for college applications. I sympathize with every high school senior trying to say succinctly, creatively and authentically something that matters to you. I ended up writing my essay about the quest for *satisfaction*. I quoted Art Garfunkel who said in all his creativity and success, he was just looking for a moment's satisfaction. A sense that everything is OK. Some peace. As an 18 year old, I had had a happy life. I liked school. I had friends. I played sports. I did a lot of fun things. I got along with people. I was a believer in Jesus. I quested after him. But I didn't feel quite right on the inside. I

felt a bit detached from everything I did, like I was always watching myself live. I wanted to know how to be filled in and whole.

The speaker in Ecclesiastes went on a similar quest. In chapter 2, we read that he tried everything. And evidently had the means to do it. He writes, “I said in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.’ I searched with my heart how to cheer my body wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do during the few days of his life.” That sounds like excellent marching orders for a college student who studied literature and philosophy! Let’s try everything! Let’s explore everything. Let’s quest for truth and party while we’re at it.



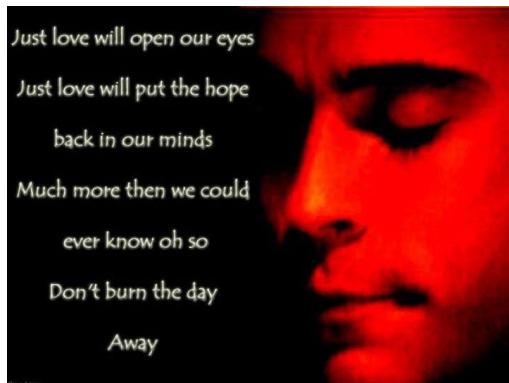
For his historical plays about King Henry IV, Shakespeare invented Sir John Falstaff, one of the funniest and heartiest characters in literature. Prince Hal, as the future King Henry is called, loves to carouse with his pal Falstaff. They coif their ale; they roar over jokes; they welcome everyone to their feasting table; they never do a serious lick of work. It’s all fun all the time. Prince Hal’s father begins to despair that his son will never grow up and become a good king. In fact, Hal also wonders if he can ever break away from the influence of Falstaff. To grow up, he’ll have to leave this perpetual boy behind.

I gotta say, I wondered that about myself. Falstaff is that part of an adolescent man that wants to eat, drink and be merry all the time. Forget class, forget work, forget commitments. Let’s just live. Man, I had a lot of fun. I was seizing life, trying it all on. But there were a couple problems. I did not, in my soul, feel satisfaction. I felt empty. I knew, at some level, that I was a big tick. A consumer. Self-focused. But could I ever change? Could I leave Falstaff and become responsible? Getting out of college and going to seminary didn’t do it. Falstaff followed me. It makes me cringe when I run into someone who says, “Oh, I remember you from school.” Yikes.

What did it take to shake Falstaff, at least enough to be able to grow up a bit? Well, it took falling so hard for a woman that I finally had something I wanted more than carousing. And it took falling in love with a baby who would wake me in the night or spit up all over me just to remind me that I’m not the center of the

universe. And it took a real job with real expectations and a sense of calling. And then a second child. And a third child. And so we were outnumbered. I remember one day getting home from work and the kids were so excited to go out and play that I jumped on my bike in shorts and dress shoes. I realized then, “I have no life. That’s all gone. I’m a goober Dad. It’s so totally, irrevocably not about me. And now I feel satisfaction. I am at peace. I’m filled in. Because I’m not my own and I have to give out more than I take in.” So then we had a fourth child to celebrate!

The solution was in the Dave Matthews song all along:



Existence seriously, sadly runs away. The time is short and all good things come to an end. Vanity of vanity all is vanity. But there is still life to be had. There are wonderful things to do: pleasures, work, design, treasure, art. The speaker in Ecclesiastes tried them all. He did everything. But he hadn't yet learned what I had to learn. Love, only love, is the inner lining that gives meaning to everything. Without it, nothing satisfies.



So let's turn this one more way around with a story from our friend and brother George Herbert. He wrote a piece called "Redemption." So the title tells us where the story is going: to the place where futility becomes hope, where emptiness gets filled, where death becomes life. The story is about a renter and his landlord. The renter is struggling. He can't afford the rent. "Having been tenant long to a rich lord, not thriving..." I had a big lease. I was in over my head. Always behind, I was not thriving. So, I decided to be bold and go find my landlord and try to negotiate a new deal, get a new lease on life.

Now right away we realize this story is about more than an apartment. It's about our lives. And what we owe to our landlord, our creator. So, the protagonist goes to seek his landlord in heaven. He's looking for God so he can beg to get a new deal. But at heaven's gate, he's told that his landlord isn't there right now. He's actually down on earth where he's seeing about some land he recently bought. The landlord has gone to take possession of his new purchase.

So our renter goes back to the world and tries to figure out where a rich landlord would be. He searches "in cities, theatres, gardens, parks and courts." But he can't find the landlord in any of those. Finally, as he passes a seedy pub, he hears "a ragged noise and mirth of thieves and murderers." They're working someone over inside. It's getting rough. Our renter looks in at the rumble. He sees his landlord being beaten by this gang of thugs. But in the midst of taking the blows, the landlord looks out and sees our renter. Stunningly, even as the hits are raining down on him, the landlord speaks to the renter, "Your new lease is granted!" And with that he died at the hands of the mob.

The title is "Redemption." The renter is us. God gave us a lease on life. Our rent is to live in love and thankfulness. But we are not thriving. Life runs away from us. Time sweeps us along. All good things come to an end and we have not done with our lives what we were supposed to do. We need a new deal. We seek God in heaven to help us. But God is not up in a luxury palace. He's down here in the world. Getting pummeled by the ungrateful and the hateful, yes, by the likes of us. How foolish it seems that God would get mixed up with us that way. But that was how God negotiated a new lease for us. He died for us. He died looking out at us to tell us the truth: the meaning of life is in love. Satisfaction is in giving out, not taking in. A life that thrives gives itself away, even unto death. And so Christ's death cancels our old rental agreement. He gives us a new lease on life. This life can seem vain and fleeting. All our best achievements and pleasures in themselves leave us empty. But when we grasp who our God is, the one who gave up his very life and calls us to do the same, we see the way forward from vain selfishness to the eternal worth of love.

¹ Robert Frost, "West-Running Brook," 1928, *Norton Anthology of Poetry*

² Dave Matthews, "Pig," *Before These Crowded Streets*, 1998.