

What Really Matters, Pt.3
Eternity in Our Hearts
Ecclesiastes 3: 9-15

**First Presbyterian Church
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God has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end (3: 11). There's a yearning for the eternal that is unique in humanity among all creatures on earth. We reach for more, yet we can't quite grasp it. The truth in this verse from Ecclesiastes is proved when we realize how this theme of eternity runs through our art.



I'm thinking of the first rock concert our younger son went to. He was still a few weeks from entering the daylight world. We'd gone to hear one of the great rock and roll voices. Steve Winwood had been the vocalist for the legendary groups Traffic and Blind Faith before embarking on a solo career. Just before Jacob was born, Winwood was riding high with songs like "Roll with It" and "Back in the High Life."

He heard the whole concert in the womb. So after Jacob was born, we'd put on a Winwood album and it would work like a lullaby. Instant comfort!

One of Winwood's biggest hits was called "Higher Love." He sings about the eternity in our hearts:

Think about it, there must be higher love
Down in the heart or hidden in the stars above
Without it, life is wasted time...

A yearning, and it's real to me,
There must be someone who is feeling for me.
Bring me a higher love!

Winwood names the intuition deep inside us that there must be something more. The universe is not indifferent. There's a higher love. We're reaching for it. And that love is reaching for us. He yearns to make a connection.

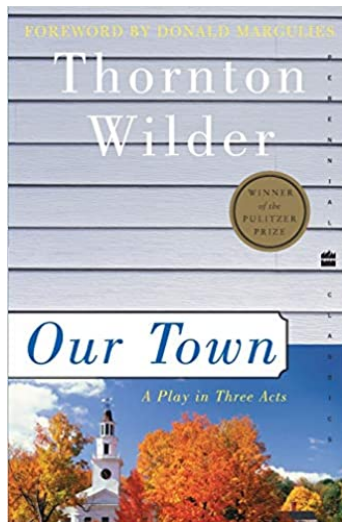


Two weeks ago, we looked at a poem by Robert Frost in which he compares our existence to a swift flowing brook: life seriously, sadly runs away. Later in that poem, Frost says that what makes human beings unique is that we are aware of our life running into the abyss. Alone among the creatures, we look back at where we've come from. We're like the water of a stream that breaks against a rock, and for a second flows

back on itself, creating the white water. This is our yearning for eternity. He writes:

It is this backward motion toward the source,
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
The tribute of the current to the source.
It is from this in nature we are from.
It is most us.

Unique among animals, we are aware of time passing, and we yearn to know both the source and the destination of our swiftly flowing stream of life.



When our eldest son Micah was in high school, Rhonda and I directed the school production of Thornton Wilder's great play, *Our Town*. Micah's character delivered these lines:

We all know that something is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the stars . . . everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people who ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being.

Ecclesiastes laments that no matter what great things we achieve, eventually it's all forgotten. But Ecclesiastes also declares that God has set eternity into our hearts. We feel it in our bones. There's got to be more to us than just these passing days. If only we could find out what it is. God put the yearning there, but the fulfillment is not readily seen. Where do we find that crucial missing puzzle piece?



Blaise Pascal was one of the world's greatest scientists in the 1600's. By age 21, Pascal invented the first digital calculator as a way to help his accountant father. Later, his exploration of liquids under pressure led him to invent the modern syringe, and eventually he was the first to prove the existence of a vacuum. As a deep

thinker, Pascal was also quite a philosopher and when he came awake to Christ, Pascal became one of the best defenders the Christian faith has seen.¹

In his unfinished book of thoughts, called *Pensees*, Pascal pondered the meaning of this eternity set in our hearts. He writes:

What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words only by God himself.²

We have a great hunger for eternity. This very vacuum inside us tells us that once we were not so empty and yearning. We were made with the happiness of knowing our Creator. We lost the intimate relationship with God, but not the yearning for that created closeness. Eternity is in our hearts, yet so that we cannot find it out. We try to fill the hole with everything around us except God. We do anything and everything to heal that ancient wound. But this infinite abyss in the human heart can only be filled by God himself. Only the infinite God can fill in the unending wound in our soul that is our yearning for eternity.



When the apostle Paul was in Athens, the philosophers asked him to explain this Jesus he had been talking about. Paul built a bridge to these questioners by appealing to the eternity set in every heart. He noted that the Athenians had erected an altar "To the Unknown God." For all the temples and gods, they knew

something was missing, and wanted to acknowledge it. So Paul boldly said “What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us...(see Acts 17: 23-27).

Paul knew his Ecclesiastes. And he knew the yearning in spiritual people. Eternity is in our hearts, yet, on our own, we can't figure out who God is or what he is doing. We know there must be a God. We can't be an accident. We know we are meant for more than this brief life of suffering in a broken world. But what? Paul told them that the missing piece is not far from them. The answer is closer than your next breath. God is right there. You just have to know how he made himself known. He came to us as the man Jesus Christ. This man Jesus is the man by which the whole world will be judged. He's the key and he's the standard. And here's the shocker. We know this about Jesus because after we crucified him, God raised Jesus from the dead. He is the Lord. He is the one who lights up the blind spot in our spirits. He satisfies the hunger in our souls. He is the way to eternity. We need grope and stumble no longer. He's right here asking us to get over ourselves and trust him.



Recently Steve Wilson sent me the story of a young woman buried in Old Highland Cemetery, not far from LSU's south gate. Josephine Favrot lost her fiancé when the West Florida rebels captured Fort Baton Rouge from the Spanish in 1810. A stray bullet killed him. After this loss, Josephine never married. But she was quite a writer. A plaque in the cemetery memorializes her

thoughts on death and the meaning of life, after losing fiancé and later her brother. It reads:

What pains we take in the acquisition of learning,
Of events, which shall be buried in a grave,
That a little earth shall rob from a world
Which shall not retain even it's memory!
At the last hour virtues which we have practiced
Shall not survive us; all follows us in the eternal night,
All goes like us into oblivion.
What discouragement in the idea of the nothingness
Of all that we have been.

That's the first half of the plaque, and it's every bit as depressing as the first chapters of Ecclesiastes. All we learn or do gets buried in a grave and forgotten. But Josephine Favrot did not stop in that despair. The second half of her plaque reads:

How great our gratitude to the Supreme Being
Who has deigned to create in us an immortal soul
Which escapes the destruction of our whole being!
Oh my God! I thank you
for having given me a soul
Which shall outlive me,
For a soul capable of lifting itself up to you,
Which feels the benefits of Your favor,
And trusts in Your power for everything:
Virtue is not an empty name
When it is from You that its reward shall come.³

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, when we remember those who have fallen in battle for our country. Researching Josephine Favrot and the history of our region, it was difficult to tell who were the good guys and who were the enemies. Throughout our history people of all types died on our soil: Spanish, English, French, Creole, African. Non-Americans and Americans. As history journeys on, we realize even our enemies came from families. Fiancés mourned their fall; parents wept that they would not return home. War is inevitable among humans, and sometimes even necessary to protect what we value and love. But the loss is still extreme. Stepping back to look at our human conflicts, we can certainly tumble into the despair expressed by writers from Ecclesiastes to Robert Frost to Dave Matthews. Life seriously, sadly runs away into nothing but a grave.

But in spite of this dying, hope does not die in the human heart, even when we want it to. God has set eternity into men's hearts. We know there has to be more. But on our own we cannot find out what God is up to. We cannot solve the eternity ache. For centuries and centuries people lived only groping after the enigma of eternity and God. But now, the unknown God has been revealed. Paul pointed the way to the man Jesus Christ whom God has appointed Lord and Savior and Judge of all. He calls us to look away from ourselves and entrust our souls to the one man who got up from the dead. A popular paraphrase of Pascal puts it this way:

There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and it can never be filled by any created thing. It can only be filled by God, made known through Jesus Christ.

Let's entrust our lives and this world to him. Let's join the faith of Josephine Favrot from more than 200 years ago. In the midst of grief, staring the fact of our earthly futility right in the face, she exclaimed, "*Oh my God! I thank you that you have given me a soul which shall outlive me, for a soul capable of lifting itself up to you, which feels the benefits of your favor, and trusts in your power for everything.*"

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Blaise-Pascal>

² Blaise Pascal's *Pensees*, #425 (Franklin Library, 1979) A popular paraphrase of this quote declares, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and it can never be filled by any created thing. It can only be filled by God, made known through Jesus Christ."

³ <https://historicalbatonrouge.blogspot.com/2008/08/highland-cemetery.html> Josephine Favrot: 1785-1836. See also the account of our own church member, the late Evelyn Thom: <http://files.usgwarchives.net/la/eastbatonrouge/cemeteries/highland.txt>.