

Introduction

Today we are recognizing the youth of Grace Community Church. It has been a joy to have them involved this morning in the various aspects of the service. Young people, as a church family, we want to say to you how grateful we are for you. You play an important role in the family of God. You matter much to God and to all of us.

In light of the focus for today, I am breaking away from Matthew for a week. I want us to turn to the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes and a special word there that is directed at youth.

[Read Text; Pray]

I assume most of you have flown in a plane before. I remember a little bit about the first time I flew. I was in the fifth grade, and two things stand out. One were the little plastic wings that Delta Airlines gave the kids and the other was the fact that we got to eat breakfast on board. That doesn't happen any more. Last time I flew I was glad to get a small pack of pretzels and a cocktail size soft drink. But that's not really why we fly; is it? Yes, we fly to get where we are going more quickly. One thing you notice whenever you fly is that upon takeoff, the nose of the plane soars into the sky so that altitude is gained as quickly as possible and the airplane reaches its cruising height in a matter of moments. Usually it takes no more 15-20 minutes. On the other end of the trip, however, the descent begins further out from the destination and continues more gradually and takes more time.

I would liken life in some ways to such a trip on an airplane. In the early years there is a great deal of growth as though propelling upward to reach the cruising altitude of life. The later years are a more gradual descent back to the dust from which we came. On this journey, I would put youth at the edge of the transition between ascending and cruising. All the energy that is expended in propelling life forward is still there, and a course is being charted for how the cruising years will be spent.

The writer of Ecclesiastes sees all of life as an experience to be enjoyed but places special focus on the younger years. In verse 7, he states "light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun." Speaking poetically the writer is saying that it is good to be alive. See how he continues in verse 8, "So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all." He should note how precious those are. For the days of darkness will be many. That is, the days of one's being dead will outnumber the days of being alive. Then the writer turns his attention in particular to the younger years. And he offers three keys to making the most of them. Rejoice. Remove. And Remember. First, he says, rejoice. Enjoy these years. Enjoy your youth. It is a gift of God. He does not mean to follow sinful inclinations but reminds the young man to bear in mind the judgment of God.

Secondly, he is to remove. He is to remove vexation and pain. In other words, he should enjoy the time of his youth without bringing on himself the weight of the human condition in such a way that he is not able to be happy here at the dawn of life.

Thirdly, remember. Remembering here is the key, I think, to be able to experience maximum joy in the younger years, to be able to rejoice and remove. So that is what I want us to center-in on this morning. We see three keys to maximizing your days as a young person. The three keys are practice, pre-occupation, and perspective.

The first key is

I. Practice.

It is communicated in the word remember. Make a practice of remembering.

A. To remember is to think, to bear in mind, actually, to meditate. Remembering is calling something to mind. It is keeping it before your attention. It is an important biblical principle. We have been studying the importance of biblical meditation in our learning and leaning times on Wednesdays. And one of the biblical terms that equates to the act of remembering is meditation. Remembering does not necessarily imply that a person has forgotten, but it does point to an intention not to forget.

Remembering is the intentional act of contemplation, thinking on, and dwelling on.

B. The Bible depicts God as remembering. He made a covenant with Noah and his sons, their offspring and every living creature after the flood to not flood the entire earth again. The sign of this covenant was the rainbow. And the Lord said, "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant that I have established."

In the book of Exodus we are told that the groaning of the children of Israel there in Egypt "reached the ears of the Lord," and he remembered the covenant he had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is not that he had a senior moment and had forgotten. Rather he bore it in mind and acted accordingly.

Psalm 105:8 says that the Lord our God "remembers his covenant forever, the word that he commanded for a thousand generations."

And God's people call on God to remember his covenant. After the golden calf incident, Moses was interceding for the people. He pleaded with the Lord that he would remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.

C. And right here the writer of Ecclesiastes calls upon the young to remember God. He is urging them to live all of life as before him. Live with a consciousness of God. Bear him in mind. Let your actions, attitudes, and ideas be brought before him. Remember him.

Jesus teaches the importance of remembering. He instituted the Lord's Supper as an occasion for remembering. Paul explains to the Corinthians what he received from the Lord in terms of the Lord's Supper. He said that at the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples he took bread and broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." He did the same with reference to the cup: "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." In remembering, you proclaim. Even so in remembering the Lord in your living, you proclaim him. Your life will bear witness to him.

D. Remembering takes place, first, in the mind. What you think about is critically important to how you live. God instructs his people to meditate on his word. We remember him by remembering his word, memorizing his word, and by letting our minds dwell on that word. Realize that you are always meditating. That music you allow into your mind through those earbuds is substance of your remembering. Those tv shows you watch are your meditation while you watch them. Those video games you play are your meditation while you play them. Those jokes to which you listen are your meditation while you are listening. Those thoughts that roll through your mind on your bed as you are falling asleep are the things you are remembering.

The writer here, who refers to himself as "The Preacher" in Ecclesiastes is calling for an intentionality in the way of thinking. He is urging that we intentionally set our minds and thoughts on the Lord. You must purpose to do it because it won't happen automatically. The flesh is in the pumping business. It constantly pumps thoughts into our minds. The only way to keep fleshly thoughts at bay is to fill your mind with God's thoughts. Remember the Lord. Paul says it this way to the Philippians, "Finally brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." When you do that you are remembering the Lord.

The first key to maximizing the joy of youth, then, is practice. Practice remembering. The second key is . . .

II. Pre-Occupation.

The pre-occupation of your remembering must be with your creator. Remember your Creator. It is striking that the preacher points to God in this way, not as the Lord, not as the Lord your God, or the Lord of Hosts. He is all that, but the preacher has his attention on the fact that the Lord your God is your creator. Remember him as such.

A. Creation is a theme that permeates the book of Ecclesiastes. Everything is done "under the sun." There is emphasis of various elements of creation, the sun, the earth, the wind, the streams, and the sea. There is reference to the beasts, to the children of man, and the cycle of life from birth to

death. There is toil and striving under the sun. There is God who is in heaven and you who are on earth. The captivation with living in the midst of God's creation and the experiences that pertain to it lead the writer to say, "Remember your Creator." This statement is a rich one, then. It speaks about who God is and it tells us some of the things we need to bear in mind as we "remember the Creator."

B. First, we remember that God himself is not created. He is the creator. From nothing he brought everything into existence. He is not confined by the creation though he interacts within it. He is greater than creation. The heavens declare his glory and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. But there is a creation, not an evolved universe. In the beginning God created. God created by speaking, by willing. All things were made through him and without him was not any thing made that was made. That is how awesome he is. Remember your creator. And that there is a creator, it takes a fool to say that there is no god. And that there is a creator gives us pause to praise him for the amazing work he has done—earth formations, lakes, seas, oceans, and streams, mountains, valleys, and plains—flowers, trees, fruits and vegetable plants—insects, birds, animals, fish, and human beings.

C. Second, we remember God as "Our" Creator. He is not just the creator. But it is a personal thing. The God who has made all of that which is out there also made you and me! David delighted in this very thought in Psalm 139. "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well."

To remember the Lord as our own personal creator is to acknowledge that we owe our existence to him. We didn't crawl on our own out of an evolutionary slime pit. If God had not created us, we would not be. And therefore, we don't belong to ourselves. We belong to him. These are the thoughts we should think in remembering our creator.

And he created us in a wonderful way. We are his work because he wove us together. Every feature we have is his idea. We are his design. We have no grounds to find fault with what he has made, not in ourselves and not in others. To remember our creator is to accept our bodies and our

features and give thanks. One of the evidences of the brokenness and darkness of our world is that people value one another on the basis of physical bodily features—face, complexion, skin color—as though one is more valuable than another. If the world says you are physically attractive, then it considers you valuable. But if the world considers you unattractive, then it considers you of little worth. Don't let the world define attractiveness and corresponding worth. That is like my jig saw telling my drill it is not valuable because it does go up and down. They're my tools and I have each one for its own particular purpose. The value of each one of us is not defined by other creatures but by the one who uniquely created each of us.

Self-acceptance is such a big thing in our culture, especially for young people where peers can be cruel in a massive struggle among other human beings to matter. Listen, to remember your creator is to remember he made you for his purpose, according to his design. And you are incredibly valuable to him because he made every human being in his own image and after his likeness. The things that distinguish us from each other do not define our worth. He does.

Remembering our creator also affirms that every ounce of energy we have to do anything comes from him. We were made with stomachs to digest food and systems to extract energy from that food and a circulatory system to distribute that energy to the cells that make up our bodies so that we can actually do more than merely exist. We can move and work and serve and learn and grow and produce. We didn't make ourselves and we do not belong to ourselves. And so we ought to use that energy to love, to serve, and to magnify him.

In addition, we owe our time to him. Not only has our Creator made us, he has appointed our time. We have a limited amount of it, but every moment is his precious gift. David, again in Psalm 139, says, "Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them." Isn't that striking? God both wrote the days in his book and formed those days for me. This is the day the Lord has made for you and me. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Some live longer lives and some live shorter lives, but no one lives longer or shorter than God's gift. What are you doing with the

days God has given you? They are days of life that he has entrusted to us and should be given back to him.

D. But here is the thing. Because he is our creator, we owe worship to him. David says to the Lord, "I will praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." We are the workmanship of God meant to display the glory of God. And we ought not to hold back the praise of God. We were given a brain to be able to conceive of the glory of God. We have been given a soul to be able to value the glory of God. We were made with vocal cords to speak the praises of God. We owe him our worship. We owe him obedience.

And furthermore, because he is our creator, he is also our judge. The writer of Ecclesiastes reminds of this fact just a couple verses above. Ecclesiastes 11: 9 says, "But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment." And such a realization makes us aware that we have not served God with all our existence, with all our time, with all our energy and with all our gifts. Man we have failed. We need help because we have sinned against our creator who is our judge. Remember your creator means remember you have violated him. But remember your creator also means remember that he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness. He has provided for the satisfaction of the demands of justice that require your eternal punishment. This gracious creator sent his only begotten son so that whoever believes in him might have eternal life. You must come to him in faith in order to please him. And he will rescue you from his own justice.

So we have seen two keys to maximizing our youth are practice and pre-occupation. The third is . . .

III. Perspective.

A. Remember your creator in the days of your youth before the evil days come. The perspective the preacher is calling for is one that recognizes the importance of the present. He sees future days as evil. And he makes his case in a graphic way. To put it in a nutshell, getting old and wearing out is on its way and those are difficult days. It is a time in which pleasures wane. And wearing out finally culminates in death. That is when the body turns back to the dust and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

B. The preacher flexes his artistic muscles by the use of vivid metaphors, but the picture of the evil days is not a pretty one. But that is the point. He talks of these days as a time when the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain. These are days of gloom with increasing darkness. After a downpour of rain, the clouds do not depart to allow the sun to shine. It is an overcast time of life.

Verse 3 depicts the decline of the body as the decline of a household. Old Testament scholar Duane Garrett argues that "the 'keepers of the house' are the hands, which tremble in old age; and the 'strong men' are the major muscle groups of the legs and back" which bend in weakness. The grinders appear to represent the teeth which have ceased to chew because there are only a few left. Those who look through the windows are the eyes. In old age they dim. The hearing goes as well. That seems to be the stress of the closed doors. You close the door when you want to shut out the noise outside, but when you are old the doors on the street shut out noise on their own keeping you from hearing well. And yet it seems the slightest disturbance like the sound of a bird can disturb your slumber. Old age also experiences the general onset of weakness. Ordinary challenges become major threats resulting in the fear of heights and a sense of danger in the streets.

From this point the writer moves away from the household metaphor looking to the almond tree. When it is in blossom it is bright white, the color of the hair in old age, if we still have any. Then here is a grasshopper which drags itself along. What can this mean? Have you ever seen a grasshopper drag itself? Me neither. Why not? They jump up high and spring from one place to another. The picture of a grasshopper dragging itself points to the loss of a spring in one's step. The longer we live the heavier our steps and the slower we move. And as everything else diminishes, so does sexual desire; "desire fails because man is going to his eternal home." That is when the silver cord is snapped, the golden bowl is broken, the pitcher shattered, and the wheel broken at the cistern. With a broken wheel, the water of life is no longer flowing.

What is the preacher saying? He is saying look around. Observe those who are older. Behold, their bodies grow weaker and weaker. Decay sets in. It

is painful and it diminishes vitality. Look and be warned. None of us likes to imagine what is sad and unwelcome. But if we ignore truth, we do so at risk of our own peril.

C. The preacher is speaking to those who still have some vim and vigor with a warning. You will not always have the strength you have right now. Don't waste it. Use it now. Make the most of your young days before all this happens. How do you do that? Remember your creator now.

There is a reason why the average age of a soldier in the military stands somewhere in the early to mid-twenties. These are peak years. You only have a short period of time at your peak before the descent starts.

James says "your life is a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." Your youth is even less than a mist.

Moses said, "the years of our lives are soon gone, and we fly away" and so he prayed, "so teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." And this is what the preacher in Ecclesiastes is preaching. Youth is so, so short and the years that follow get harder as they go. Don't waste your youth. Remember your creator while you still can serve him with strength, now while you have your most energy, while you are still hopping, while you are still at cruising altitude and before you begin the descent of the flight which is life.

Conclusion

You all know I went to Clemson University and that I pull for the Tigers especially in football. Yet I know that football is just a game. That is one reason I really appreciate Clemson's head football coach Dabo Swinney. He loves winning football games, but he is even more concerned about impacting young men to be good citizens and to live productive lives that benefit the world. That in itself won't get you in to heaven, but it is cool to see that kind of standard in an arena often dominated by sheer self-aggrandizement. I watched a motivational speech given by Dabo to a group of young men. He was asked to talk to these young men about what he would say to himself as a 16-year-old if he could go back. And he told them that the first thing he would say is what matters more than anything

else is Jesus. He said a couple more things as well. But one of the compelling matters he wanted to relate to the guys was to make the most of the present so as not to have regret in the future. He said, "I will do what I can while I can, so that when I cannot, I will not wish that I would have when I could have." You know that is what the writer of Ecclesiastes is saying this morning. Remember your creator NOW. You may be cruising now, but the days of descent, days of decline and weakness are coming. Indeed those days will be hard. And then comes death. The body goes back to the earth and the soul stands before God. It will be too late then to do what you should have when you could have. And what matters most is this, "Will you have remembered your creator?"

This exhortation is a lesson for us all. It is not just for the youngest of us although it certainly is important for them. The preacher does not want us to live to regret wasted days, wasted months, wasted years. And while the most time to be possibly wasted or redeemed is right there in the earliest years of youth, we all have time we can either waste or redeem. Not a few of us have regrets about the time and strength we have wasted. But even if we have wasted time, we still have time to use well until the silver cord is snapped. Don't waste any more time wishing you had not wasted so much time. Use whatever you have remembering your creator and looking ahead to being welcomed into the joy of your master.