

*Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (NRSV)*

<sup>9</sup>Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. <sup>10</sup>For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. <sup>11</sup>Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? <sup>12</sup>And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

*Romans 12:9-18 (The Message)*

<sup>9-10</sup>Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

<sup>11-13</sup>Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

<sup>14-16</sup>Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

<sup>17-18</sup>Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody.

*Do we love from the center? Are we a good friend who loves deeply? What questions should we be asking ourselves about our relationships?*

As I've mentioned a few times, I usually write these studies about a week ahead of time. Thus, as I write this, Rev. Renee Giles' memorial service will be tomorrow morning.

Sermon series, topics, and Scripture selections are done well ahead of time. Today could have been planned around anything, from the Babylonian exile to one of Jesus' parables. Instead, it is about our relationships with people, with a beautiful rendering by Eugene Peterson of a well-known passage from Paul's letter to the Romans. As I began work on this passage, I was inevitably drawn to thoughts of Renee, for, more than most people I know, Renee loved from the center, she never faked it.

I never heard an unkind word from Renee about another person. No matter how much her illness was making her hurt, she always had a smile. She was "cheerfully expectant" in all things. No matter how hard things got for her, she never quit, never gave up. Indeed, she probably pushed herself too hard in her determination to go about the making of disciples of Jesus Christ despite her illness.

She taught me a lot about praying, especially when things got toughest. She was a good friend to so many. She never insisted on being the "great somebody." I doubt there was anyone that she didn't get along with. Renee loved from the center . . . her strong, kind, Spirit-filled, wise, loving center.

I'm sure I could have learned a lot more from Renee about relationships had I been a better and more willing student. But, for me and many men, relationships are not always at the top of our list, no matter how much we profess that we love God and neighbor. In his book, *Chazown*, Craig Groeschel admits that "for years, I didn't see the value of intentionally developing godly relationships. That was my wife's department, so I left the relational ball in her court. Content with following along, I struggled relationally, not seeing the value of investing in and receiving from them." Sounds a lot like me and other men I know. We know with our heads and even our hearts that we proclaim a relational God who desires love from us before all else – love for God and love of others. But when it comes to the real work of relationships, too many men back off, unsure of how to proceed and even unwilling.

Opening with a telling “therefore,” Romans 12 marks a turn in Paul’s letter. But it is not the turn people often think is taken. Some contrast Paul’s “theology” (Chapters 1-11) with his “ethics” (Chapters 12-16), perhaps describing it as “belief” and “practice.” But this does Paul a disservice. There can be no such separation for Paul or for us. What we “believe” and what we “do” are woven together and cannot be pulled apart. Both the intellectually-minded and the ever-practical find it more comfortable to put belief and practice in two separate boxes, but, as N.T. Wright aptly notes, it is like trying to separate our blood and our breath.

Romans 1-11 takes us up a mountain, showing us that God’s faithfulness to the covenant made with Abraham and the Israelites has been brought to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. And with Jesus’ arrival nothing can ever be the same. Creation and humanity have been remade, even as we await this re-creation’s final consummation.

In Romans 12, Paul begins to show us, concretely, what this re-creation looks like. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may see clearly what is “good and acceptable and perfect,” so that we can imaginatively comprehend and embrace the will of

God (12:2). This renewing does not take place in isolation, but in relationship within community. Our reshaping plays out differently from person to person, but all of it is given to us for the building up of the community (12:3-8).

And what does this renewing look like? It looks like love. And what does love look like? Love is genuine, coming from the center of ourselves. It can’t be faked. Love is sacrificial. It is mutual. It is being willing to play second fiddle. Love is taking care of those who need us or are simply in need. We laugh with our friends when they laugh and we cry with them when they mourn. Read Romans 12:9-18 again. Read it in different translations. Try reading it less as a series of exhortations and more as a description, an imaginative description of the renewed mind living with others, including even those who are hostile to us or to the Gospel of Christ.

It is always worth remembering that the NT word for love is nearly always the Greek, *agape*. In Greek usage, it was a colorless, empty word, waiting to be filled with meaning and Paul doesn’t hesitate to fill it right up. All understandings of love that exclude God are mere distortions of the real thing. Thus, Paul tells the Christians in Rome that they are to love but then has to tell them exactly what genuine God-given love looks like, so that they can despise what is evil and hold on to what is good (12:9).

All this takes more imagination than we think. The world wants to teach us about love, to conform us to its ways. In the memorable words of J.B. Phillips, the world wants to squeeze us into its mold. So we must train ourselves to recognize the face of Christian love – and today, that face is Renee’s.

### Ecclesiastes

If you’ve read Ecclesiastes, you might be asking yourself what a passage from it is doing in a series about finding purpose. Indeed, you don’t have to read much of Ecclesiastes before you find yourself asking how this book made it into the Bible at all!

At first glance, Ecclesiastes seems to endorse a despairing view of life and creation. In the opening phrases, we are introduced to the Teacher’s teaching: “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” The Hebrew word that the NRSV translates as “vanity” is *hebel*, which literally means breath or vapor. The NRSV retains the archaic word “vanity” because of its long tradition in English literature. Here, the word means something close to “meaninglessness” and that is how the NIV renders it.

Yet, by painting vivid pictures of a purposeless, godless life, Ecclesiastes points us toward the futility of any life not grounded in God and even the futility of all life if there is no god.

There seem to be as many approaches to Ecclesiastes as there are commentators, so don’t be surprised if you find it challenging. One way to see the book’s structure is to compare it to Job. In Job, there are the introductory scenes, followed by the long (and fruitless!) speeches by Job and his friends, followed by the arrival of God and the restoration of Job’s fortunes. Ecclesiastes opens with a short prologue where the narrator tells of the Teacher’s sayings (1:1 – 1:11). Then there are 11 or so chapters where the Teacher speaks for himself (also fruitlessly!). At the end of the book, our narrator returns and offers us some perspective (God’s perspective!) on the Teacher’s philosophy. (12:9-14)

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Ecclesiastes (continued from the page 2 text box)

In *A Survey of the Old Testament*, Andrew Hill & John Walton<sup>1</sup> suggest that there are four main themes in Ecclesiastes:

- We should not expect life to be self-fulfilling.
- Our frustrations in life are unavoidable.
- We must accept the seasons of life.
- We can enjoy life only through a God-centered world-view.

Many Old Testament writers paint pictures for us, calling us to look for the truths behind the picture. For example, Micah 4:1-8 is a picture of God's kingdom. I tend to see Ecclesiastes as a picture of a life lived without God. It is a bleak picture that pulls no punches. If there is no God or if we choose to live as if there is no God, then life is "meaningless," and we might as well "eat, drink, and be merry." There are a few brighter moments in the book, but they only lure one back into the Teacher's world of the absurd, back into the his efforts to make his way through his meaningless life. Actually, if you believe your life has no purpose or meaning, his advice is pretty good!

Ecclesiastes testifies to Israel's willingness to confront the hard realities of life, the sense of purposelessness and drift that afflict us all from time to time. Israel saw that for mature, caring adults, life is really not very simple and it is not a life of endless victories. The ordinary experiences of life test our faith. Still, as the narrator tells us at the end of the book—when all has been said and all the absurdities of life confronted, we are called to our duty: "Fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13).

## READING WITH HEART & MIND, MAY 6 – MAY 12

**Sunday, Acts 9:32-43** What purposes underlie these healings? How do they move forward the proclaiming of the Good News? What are the parallels in the story of Tabitha to raisings by Elijah, (1 Kings 17:17-24), Elisha (2 Kings 4:18-37), and Jesus (Luke 7:11-17)?

**Monday, Acts 10** This is a major turning point in Acts – the first conversion of a gentile. How would you summarize the major issues raised by this conversion? What is the significance that Cornelius is a Roman Centurion?

**Tuesday, Acts 11:1-18** Why does Peter have to justify his baptizing of Cornelius and his household? Why is this circumcision business so important? Do you think that Peter's story settles the matter among the followers of Jesus, all of whom are Jewish?

**Wednesday, Acts 11:19-30** Antioch (in Syria, on the Orontes river) was the third most important city in the Roman empire after Rome and Alexandria, Egypt. What do we learn here about its place in the burgeoning Christian community? Who is Barnabas?

**Thursday, Acts 12** The James killed here is not Jesus' half-brother who would later become the leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem, write the NT book bearing his name, and be martyred in the early 60's AD. What is the theological significance of Peter's deliverance from prison? Who rescues him? The James in v. 17 is Jesus' half-brother.

**Friday, Acts 13** The next two chapters tell of Paul's first missionary journey. It will take him and Barnabas in southern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) after a stop on Cyprus. Who selects Paul and Barnabas for this trip? What sort of reception do they get in Cyprus and Pisidian Antioch (not the massive city of Antioch in Syria)? Why does Paul talk so much about the Old Testament story in his speech?

**Saturday, Acts 14** What reception do Paul and Barnabas get in Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe? Why are they worshipped? Notice that Paul is beaten so badly this time that he is left for dead. Read 2 Corinthians 11:16-33 where he recounts his many sufferings.

## Sermon Notes

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### **Scott Engle's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.**

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at [sengle@standrewacademy.org](mailto:sengle@standrewacademy.org).

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Groeschel offers us four questions about relationships that we ought to ask ourselves and then act upon:

1. *What relationship needs to be initiated?*

The main point of today's passage from Ecclesiastes is that we actually need others, we are not called to solitary lives. Even more, three is better than two. How many of your good friends know each other? Are you part of a strong threefold cord (4:12) or do you find yourself trying to find and live out your vision alone? As Groeschel wisely notes, sometimes we have to go out and look for the relationships we need; we can't always wait for them to come to us.

2. *What relationship needs to be nurtured?*

It is easy to let relationships drift along, even our marriage. We wouldn't put it this way, but we take for granted too many of our most important relationships. We invest in our homes, in our jobs, in our education – but do we invest in the important relationships of our lives?

3. *What relationship needs to be restored?*

Do you have a relationship that has been broken or wounded? It is tempting to give up on such a relationship, to see all hope as lost, and to simply move on. But, with God, hope is never lost. We can pray for guidance and wisdom in knowing where God would have us undertake relationship repair work . . . and where we should not.

4. *What relationship needs to be severed?*

This is a question we might not want to think about, but it is a good one. There may be people in your life who are only barriers in your effort to live as an authentic disciple of Jesus. Perhaps there is someone who is always tempting you to abandon your commitment to holy living. Perhaps there is someone whose lack of integrity is like a cancer in your life. Severing ties need not be forever; repentance and changed lives are always possible with God. But we probably underestimate the risk to us that some people pose. See 1 Corinthians 5 to read about Paul's fears about what one such person can do to an entire Christian community.