

Qoheleth's Conundrum: "Guess I'll Go Eat Worms!"

A Sermon Preached at Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens GA

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SERMON SUMMARY

If I were to choose one book in the Bible whose message is most closely in accord with UU principles and values, it would be *Qoheleth*. Qoheleth held up a mirror to his Jewish culture, and said, "Take a close look. Consider all our systems and laws for trying to put the world into alphabetical order. Look at our sacred history; look what's happened to our Promised Land; our journey from slavery in Egypt to becoming a Chosen People and living under a covenant -- promising to live faithfully and uphold God's laws, and in return God would protect us. Take another look at the facts, my friends. The armies of Assyria, Babylon and Persia have destroyed our homeland. Now the Greeks are doing the same. All our faithfulness, our struggles: Look what it's come to. It's a wasteland. Armies surrounded us, and all the levees and fortifications did not hold back the tide.

Qoheleth uses a single word -- *hebel* -- 38 times. Often translated as "vanity", it also means "vapor" or breath. To Qoheleth all of life is transient, like breathing. What *seems* real can't be preserved or given ultimate value. All that we treasure is like our breathing. It may be life-giving; yet we can't hold on to it. It moves through us, and is gone. The author recounts his own experience: "I undertook great works; I built houses and planted vineyards. Then I reviewed my labor and toil; and I saw that everything I had built was impermanent; it could vanish in the wink of an eye. I saw that my pursuits of success were like chasing after the wind. Then I tried to figure out what is wisdom, and how to distinguish true wisdom from madness and folly. But who knows whether he will [turn out to] be wise, or a fool? This too is like our breath. To have such self-assuredness is chasing after wind."

But Qoheleth doesn't wallow in self-pity and despair. Quite the opposite. Qoheleth says rather: SINCE it is not possible to predict a fair, just, logical world that operates under laws of causal necessity and rational outcomes; and SINCE the universe is apparently NOT governed by all our Jewish legal codes spelling what we must do to be happy-ever-after: **Then** it is up to us to re-claim and re-create the goodness which is ever-fleeting, vulnerable to sabotage, and in need of nurturing. Since radical contingency intervenes; and there may be times when the levees will the best forecasts and preparedness will not save us: It is even more our responsibility to choose to bless the world.

What then shall I do? Qoheleth writes: "Go thy way; eat thy bread with joy; and drink thy wine with a merry heart. Whatever thy hand finds to do, do it with dedication and with all thy might. Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is to behold the sun. So behold the sun, and bless all of creation, and do so before thy spirit goes back to the God who gave it in thy final breath." Loosely translated, that means: "Carpe diem". Goodness and love are neither predictable outcomes of following the instructions, nor are they permanent if they do appear. They must be re-created in every moment. Therefore, amidst an unjust world and a decidedly un-even playing field: In the face of all that stuff, you and I have a choice. We have a choice to either curse the world, or to bless the world. That sounds like a Unitarian message, if ever there was one.

What is Qoheleth doing, in saying eat thy bread, drink thy wine, love and bless this world. Is he sugar-coating suffering? Not at all. He is re-framing reality in ways that empower people. He is establishing a higher ground for dialogue, and for action. He is saying: Re-frame reality by lifting up stories of courage, creativity, heroism, selflessness, generosity of spirit. Don't turn over the cameras and microphones to the cynics and purveyors of toxic fear. Re-claim a higher ground from which you can transform this world, and empower one another in the process.

Heresies are important for two reasons:

Heresies are Resources. They are the raw material from which new world-views arise. The scientific Revolution was created by people who were adept in the occult notions of astrology, alchemy, and ritual magic. When venerable assumptions were strained to the breaking point by contact with new realities, or when the old orthodoxy loses its capacity for understanding, curiosity and vitality, something emerges from the periphery of heresy to take its place. Heresies are a reservoir of possibilities that float at the margins of acceptability. If heresy were eliminated, cultures and individuals would have impenetrable barriers surrounding them. They would be unable to breathe fresh air into their systems. "If anomalies can be plowed back into the system, the system becomes stronger. If on the other hand you insist on purity, you become like a body with no orifices, which means you quickly die." Any faith that is truly alive is continually borrowing from and incorporating the heresies in the immediate surroundings. Just as mutant characteristics in the presence of shifting environments play a major role in biological evolution, even so heresies are the mutant and driving agents of change in living communities.

Heresies are Mirrors. We learn who we are through reflection. Mirrors reflect back only what is visible. And reflected objects become visible only through contrast. A black cat cannot be seen in a pitch-dark room, but only against a lighter background. Heresies provide the contrasts that enable us to see our own orthodoxies. Insofar as we lack awareness of our hidden orthodoxies, we stay trapped within them, rather than recognizing them as a choice which we can indeed let go.

Heretics are resources. And they are mirrors. The fascinating aspect of the Dalai Lama's life is that he has been the heretic in the global village of economic and political power. Most politicians and corporate figures refuse to be seen near him. Because like all heretics he is a resource, and he is a mirror. He serves as a mirror to the brutality of the Chinese occupation forces. He has refused to respond to cruelty with further hatred. In the presence of economic exploitation by corporate and political gamesmanship, the Dalai Lama declares that compassion -- not profiteering -- is the bottom line. He declares, echoing the words of the Buddha:

"We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with a pure mind, and happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakeable."