Journeying Together

Ecclesiastes 1 – 3

TUMC, February 2, 2025

We are continuing our series “Together on a Journey,” which reminds me of having heard that life is not about the destination, but the journey, and this morning I want to suggest that the journey is about us examining the beliefs, values and virtues that influence our behavior, govern our lives and shape our faith, both as individuals and as a congregation.

On this journey, I am inviting you to walk with the character in our scripture reading. Some translations of the Bible say he was King Solomon, but the translation I used called him “The Teacher,” a title I will use.

As we journey together, I am imagining him walking along a road as he claims:

 I had the power of a king;

I amassed great wealth,

And I had a harem.

Then he says he hated life, and condemned everything as utterly meaningless, observing that:

**5**The sun rises and sets, and then repeats itself,
**6**The wind blows to the south
    and turns to the north; and then blows anywhere else.
**7**All streams flow into the sea,
    yet the sea is never full.

Then he, again, condemned life as utterly meaningless, declaring that it was “chasing after the wind,” a statement he repeated five times in the first two chapters of the book.

We might conclude that something happened to the Teacher that made him despondent, influencing him to condemn life and everything that supports it. If he lived today, we might think he watched too much news from Canada’s southern neighbors, and he needed to get other perspectives on life. He might also consider what would happen if the sun did not rise; if the wind stopped blowing and the rivers stopped flowing.

Then the teacher got poetic, offering a poem that Pete Seeger turned into a folk song, and the Byrds popularized it, catching the imaginations of a generation, telling us there is a time for every purpose under heaven. There is:

   a time to be born and a time to die,
    a time to kill and a time to heal,
    a time to love and a time to hate, and
    a time for war and a time for peace,

The popular interpretation of that passage is that it celebrates the rhythms of life, indicating that there is a time for everything.

A less popular interpretation says the Teacher is mocking the people who claim that life has meaning and purpose. He has heard people say things like:

“Life has rhythms that give meaning and purpose to everything.”

and he responds:

“You think life has rhythms, meanings and purposes; tell me about the rhythms of hate, killing, death and war. They only make life more meaningless and purposeless.

It is somewhat similar to people in our cultures who claim that God has reasons for everything, and someone responds:

If God has reasons for everything, tell me why an airplane full of young, aspiring athletes and many other gifted and talented people crashes in a river, causing everyone in it to die.

If we continued studying Ecclesiastes, we would see that the Teacher restored some order to his life, but I want to return to his statements in the earlier verses and consider the things he condemned can enhance our lives if we manage them effectively.

The teacher tells us that he had:

the power of a king;

great wealth, and

a harem,

and he hated life,

 believing it was chasing after the wind.

I want to suggest that these issues address power, money and temperance. In my culture, temperance is associated with the prohibition of alcohol in the 19th and 20th century. However, it addresses a range of virtues that develop of a moral character and healthy social relationships.

I will address power, money and temperance briefly.

The teacher, who esteems himself as wise, seems to be experiencing the powerless of power, which is characteristic of many people in churches, especially church leaders. They want to get things done, but they feel powerless. They don’t seem to know that, in congregations, power multiplies when it is shared, and it evaporates when it isn’t shared.

Ironically, congregational leaders who don’t share power feel powerless. However, when they share it, it multiplies, people feel empowered, and congregations flourish.

Building and maintaining a healthy congregation is an important dimension of our journey together, and it depends on the abilities of everyone to share power, which is often encouraging people to take the risks of doing something they would like to do but don’t feel able---or empowered, to do.

My impression is that power at TUMC is shared well.

Our second item is money. We all need it, and our management of it is one of the best indicators of our character, both as individuals and as a congregation.

The teacher, with whom we are journeying, was wealthy. He tells us that he tested himself with pleasure to see what is good, and he probably spend a lot of money on it before he concluded that pleasure meaningless.

In this sense, the teacher is similar to the author and playwriter, Oscar Wilde, who said he lived for all the pleasure he could get, believing that something must be good if it felt good.

Then he found himself in jail for two years and spent the time pondering his assumptions about what makes life worth living.

In his ruminations, he concluded that pleasure is good, but sorrow is the supreme human emotion. Wilde observed that sorrow is baked into this world of suffering, and, without it, we would lose the meanings of our humanity. To be human is to express compassion, empathy and sorrow for the people who suffer.

When I think of the teacher disbanding his harem; apparently, it did not become the source of pleasure as he expected, I wonder if he expressed sorrow for dehumanizing the women who comprised it.

I would like to think he mustered the moral courage to give them severance payments, realizing that he regarded money meaningless, but it would have been incredibly meaningful to them. It would empower them to return to their families and communities with dignity, not to ask for support, but to provide it. One expression of dignity is having something to share.

The Teacher’s decision to give the women severance payments depends on his ability to look beyond himself to see how his money could benefit other people.

Oscar Wilde would say that is not possible because the teacher did not suffer or embrace sorrow, making him unable to muster the compassion to empathize with them. The women probably returned to their families and communities as indigents, perhaps as beggars and street walkers, while he lamented that his money was meaningless. Without experiencing sorrow, he could not imagine the joy of sharing it with them.

Our third item on the journey is temperance, a virtue that applies to the behaviors that build strong moral character, including trust, respect, honesty, generosity, integrity, empathy, compassion, goodwill, personal discipline, etc.; virtues that are as important now as it has ever been. For the past week, many people who live in North America have been anxious about the intemperance of people who will lead the departments of U.S. government. They provoke the debate about whether moral character is necessary for effective leadership.

Moral character has always been necessary for effective leadership, and they are giving us any reasons to believe that it has become obsolete.

However, on our journey together, we are enjoying the privilege of participating in a congregation that practices the virtues that produce temperance, which establishes the boundaries that are vital to enhancing our welfare as individuals and as a congregation, the boundaries the guide us in efforts to build relationships that are based on love, trust and respect, the virtues that govern the extent to which we want to know each other and to be known by each other.

Now, I will admit that I feel like a moral prude preaching on temperance, but I read the news this morning about our nations are engaging in a trade war, and I will suggest that the ancient philosophers of Western Culture would say trade wars result from moral incontinence, a term they used to describe people who cannot control their immoral impulses. The profane streak in me says the U.S. president is morally incontinent, and he wants to relieve himself on everyone.

Cultivating the boundaries that build healthy relationship is so essential to our well-being that Robert Frost wrote a poem about them. Every year, he and his neighbor mended a wall that maintained their friendship by serving as the boundary between their properties. Frost preferred to write poetry and wrote one about good walls making good neighbors. In churches, good boundaries make good parishioners, competent pastors and caring congregations, places where everyone feels safe, welcomed and affirmed.

At the end of the journey, I imagine that we will have a congregational meal, and people will discuss their experiences of the day.

Many people will say they enjoyed chatting with each other as they walked on the beautiful terrain in lovely weather, building and enhanced relationships in meaningful ways.

Then some people will mention the pains of the journey. A few of them were thirsty and hungry; others got blisters on their feet, and many had sore muscles; they limped, stumbled and lagged behind. One or two considered quitting.

Then the conversation turned to the people who gave food to those who were hungry and water to those who were thirsty. Others bandage blisters on sore feet, and several people walked with those who were limping and stumbling, supporting them in their hope to finish the journey.

At the end of the meal, people agreed that the most memorable and meaningful parts of the journey were building meaningful relationships by serving each other and bearing each other’s burdens, which, according the Epistle to the Galatians, is fulfilling the law of Christ.