

Dwelling in our Embrace: The Power of Companionship

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3, 9-12

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Good morning...

I want to begin by saying thank you. On behalf of all the interns, what a joy it has been to be in community with you this summer. What an honor and privilege it is to be standing before you today. You've gotten to know at least a little about each of us. And by now you probably know this about me. I am a self-confessed church nerd.

You see, some people geek out about new clothing fads. Others follow, whatever hot band coming into town. But for me, a 6'3, 215-pound man, I geek out when I see a book by some random dead theologian that I have yet to read.

I also love a good energizer. Those at SNAC two weeks ago know what I am talking about. You see, or you saw, I have no rhythm. Not a dancing bone in my body. However ... at SNAC I did find hope. That hope came from watching our senior pastor, John, try and get down and raise the roof (*Raise the Roof*). Trust me - we got that on video.

Yes, I confess I do love the church. As a cradle Presbyterian and Christian Education major, I also love what the church has to say about where God is in our lives and in the world. In fancy, smancy Presbyterian lingo, we call these doctrines. And one of my favorites is the Doctrine of Sovereignty. Basically, it claims that God doesn't depend on us to be God, to act, or move across history. God does what God wants to. God moves the world in the direction of Her kingdom, even and often in ways we don't understand.

Now, here is another confession... This summer, I have had to rethink this doctrine, along with a range of other beliefs that I am wrestling and struggling with.

You have walked beside us, the Gambrell Social Justice Interns, as we have had an in-depth study of social justice issues. Together, we have wrestled with issues from race to housing, from mass incarceration to LGBTQ rights.

This summer, we have encountered the unceasingly systemic oppression and violence against our neighbors here in Charlotte and across the globe. We have taken a long hard look at the agonizing pain of the Other from so many blatant and sickening injustices. There has been no sugar coating here. We have heard and seen how oppressors use power and influence to dominate and to suppress millions and millions of men, women, and children

And ... along the way, we may have had our moments – moments when we just wanted to push them out beyond our reach, leaving them in despair instead of comforting them. It is easier to dehumanize them by building a wall of indifference and apathy than to grapple with their realities.

I know I have laid awake multiple nights this summer heartbroken as I realized how I have subliminally and even actively participated in the othering and oppression of others. Me! A person who plans to enter ministry! The person standing in front of you today! I have contributed

to the tears of children and to the brokenness of the world. I lay there staring at my fan wondering what the heck can be done.

And another thing: I am tired. I am tired of sitting here week after week hearing of these injustices committed to our neighbors. I am tired of feeling pushed around by the dominant forces of this empire telling us that one life is worth more than another. I am tired of this empire telling us that just because of our sexual orientation that I can buy a cake, while someone who is LGBTQ cannot. I am tired of this empire saying that some kids do not deserve love and care just because they were born in another country and because of fear they fled here.

Watch the news and it's clear: this oppression is an industry and it is embedded in our society. It is in our state houses, it is in our schools, it is in our churches, it is where we do business, it is in our neighborhoods, and it is in our streets.

A moment ago, we heard from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. Biblical scholars differ on who wrote this book and when. But all agree it is a book of wisdom for the ages.

The scripture we hear this morning is tough stuff. Ecclesiastes wonders aloud whether it is better to be dead than to live in what he calls the wreckage of the broken and sinful world.

He asks if it is better to not be born at all than to see or experience the deep despair of this world. Those who had not been born, he says, are spared from the agony and torture that rips away at our humanity like ravaging dogs.

Yes, Ecclesiastes at this point seems ready to throw in the towel. And I know with this congregational study this summer many of us may know the feeling. We've said it every Sunday from this pulpit: the vast injustices we've explored can't be solved this month, this year, maybe not even this decade or in our lifetimes.

So ... we are left with three options: we can let this doom and darkness press us into the pit of despair and depression... we can escape into some made-up fantasy land where we can skip in a field of daisies and forget the pain of this world...or... we can take action with those who are oppressed.

(Not to, not for ... but WITH.)

That difference – the difference between doing something **with** the other rather than just doing it **to** or **for** the other is what Ecclesiastes has to say to us in this morning's reading.

Ecclesiastes wrestled with the beast of injustice in a time when the good die young, when it seemed evil prospered from every direction. He desperately wondered and cried out about what could be done. What can be done?

But, as with other voices from scripture we've heard this summer, he doesn't suggest we fold our cards. Instead, he calls us into companionship **with** the oppressed. Our physical bodies must be **with** the victims of injustice. He calls us to put **our** backs against the wall right next to theirs. He calls us into the darkness that they dwell in, he calls us into **their** wreckage. We must be fully present in body, mind, and spirit with them. We must decenter ourselves and move out to the margins, out with our heart, soul, mind and strength. Their brokenness must become our brokenness. Their tears must become our tears. Their heartache must become our heartache.

People of Caldwell, it's clear to all of us interns that many here have experienced darkness and brokenness before. Each experiences the wreckage of life at some time. It does not stop at boundaries of race or class or sexual identity or any other human difference. Trouble offers no quarter.

That includes me. For me it came with my parents' divorce. I was in 6th grade. At 11 years old my concept of the world was shattered. I was suddenly propelled into adulthood and the darkest place I'd ever known. The divorce snatched the veil of childlike innocence from my eyes as what I had known as absolute truths were exposed as lies. My world crumpled into nothing more than soot and ash...Friends, that darkness is real...When it comes, it pierces one to their very core... It is this darkness the oppressed of this world are plagued with on a daily basis.

What are we to do? Well, Ecclesiastes says we are not to rush in, thinking of ourselves as knights in shining armor. St. Benedict describes how we do not come and dwell with the one facing injustice out of a sense of superiority. That risks perpetuating the dominant systems narratives of today. Instead we are to come with a willingness to receive whatever the other might teach us. This companionship is one based on mutual humility and mutual understanding. We know that few situations are changed instantly. Yet, we must come ... come as one human being to another. From one beloved child of God to another. By dwelling in companionship like this, we are both givers and receivers of grace.

That is what your interns have been learning and practicing this summer. We have been calling it the "Summer of Encounter." And we've encountered so many "others" this summer.

At Time Out Youth and Transcend, Flora has encountered and dwelt with LGBTQ youth. Where many are ostracized by their family and our society. These agency partners meet them and help create with them community and wholeness.

Julian has been shadowing a nurse and other case workers at Urban Ministries Center, which works with the city's homeless and housing starved neighbors. Every day, he's encountered and dwelt with those who are hurt physically and emotionally, and he's worked for the physical wellness of all.

Lydia has worked with Mayfield Memorial Baptist Church, which has a dream of affordable housing on 10 acres it owns. She's seen the difficulty of balancing neighborhood interests with developers' bottom lines. She has encountered and dwelt with a North Charlotte congregation and its neighbors who simply want decent housing in a neighborhood that was infested by gang violence not that long ago.

And ... Laura has dwelt at the intersection of faith, politics and public policy. She has encountered the one's Jesus calls the "least of these" and their advocates to lift up their voices in the legislative and political arenas...

These encounters show us just how fruitful it is when we dwell WITH the other, in companionship WITH the Other. We've learned how, as Ecclesiastes says, we are not meant to go it alone, how we are ordained to be in community, even if that community is in ones and twos and threes.

Ecclesiastes says, “two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.” God blesses our toil and our companionship. God comes into our simple acts of dwelling with each other and shines light like a beacon.

Ecclesiastes says that “for if they fall, one will lift up the other ... but WOE to the one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.” “One might prevail against another,” he writes, but “two will withstand one.”

I know how utterly alone and abandoned I felt at age 11 when the home life I’d always known and trusted unraveled. As with Ecclesiastes, I had my own moments of wondering if I should have ever been born at all – that was how low I felt at times in those days. That darkness clawed at me constantly, day after day, after day.

Then God showed me the power we have to help others when we simply dwell WITH them. The one that dwelled with me back then was my mom and my now step dad. They faced their own toils and grief. But they dwelled with me through every tear, through every backlash and angry outburst from me, through every sleepless night and every moment of despair.

When all I could see was the wreckage of life that Ecclesiastes describes, when I even questioned God, they were there. They helped me see who God truly is. God is the one who dwells with us, regardless of what we are facing.

I still remember one conversation I had with my step dad. In that moment, God’s light shone through so brightly I learned I could never, ever walk away from it. With that light through his companionship, I stepped out of the wreckage and entered into a joy that words can never describe, a gift from God that inspires my eternal gratitude and the devotion of my life in return.

It is through this ‘being with’ that we alleviate the oppressive and overbearing load on each other. God is in every situation. You see, God is in the wreckage when it comes knocking down the door of another person. But when we come alongside that person and God, we are the third part of the threefold cord Ecclesiastes describes. God wraps us and binds us together. Through our encounters with the oppressed, God brings hope to the orphan, to the widow, to the immigrant, and the outcast.

It is then, friends, in our encounters the other at their most vulnerable points, that we begin to truly understand our faith.

(*KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK*). Do you hear that? That is the knock of the children who are separated from their families. It is the knock of the African American who has been labeled as a criminal for the color of their skin. It is the knock of the LGBTQ youth who has been kicked out of their house for being courageous enough to affirm their identity. These and others are knocking. God is already with them.

How will we respond?