

Sticking Together
Ecclesiastes 4:7-12; Matthew 12:46-49
West Valley Presbyterian Church, January 8, 2023



Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:
There was a man all alone;
he had neither son nor brother.
There was no end to his toil,
yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.

SLIDE 2

“For whom am I toiling,” he asked,
“and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?”
This too is meaningless –
a miserable business!

SLIDE 3

Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:
If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.

SLIDE 4

Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

SLIDE 5

Matthew 12:46-49

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?”

SLIDE 6

Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

(Janet reads along with slides) Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

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1. As you read through the book of Ecclesiastes, you frequently encounter the word “meaningless.” Qohelet uses the Hebrew word *hebel*, which has variously been translated as “meaningless”, or “pointless”, or “useless”, or in the KJV, “vanity”. It can mean chasing after the wind.

2. And certainly Qohelet’s description of the man all alone sounds like he leads a meaningless life.
A. He reminds me of Dickens’ character Ebenezer Scrooge, pre-conversion.

B. Dickens writes, "Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas."

C. So here you have a man with no friends, no relatives except for a nephew whom he refuses to visit, and only the coldest of business relationships. He's making plenty of money; but why? What's the point? He certainly doesn't want to spend it; remember the scene of Scrooge eating a bowl of thin gruel for his dinner, in front of the tiniest of fires, in the middle of a London winter? Nor does he want to leave his money to a person or a cause or an organization.

D. All his toil is meaningless. There's no point.

E. What a perfect illustration of what Qohelet is talking about!

3. What then is the remedy for a meaningless life? The remedy, says Qohelet, is companionship. Sticking together with other people.

SLIDE 7

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12a

Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:
If either of them falls down,
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But how can one keep warm alone?
Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.

4. Two are better than one, from a practical point of view.

A. Have you ever noticed that splitting a job in half makes it go more than twice as fast as it would have alone? Like for instance, suppose you are painting the inside walls of a large garage. One person doing it alone would probably need 8-10 hours, because you have to do the taping, and the painting of all the little details: the corners, and the areas near the ceiling and the floors, and around the door and window frames, before you can even start rolling the walls.

B. But if you have two people, then one person can do all the picky little details, and the other person can roller. In fact, that way it takes less than half the time as it would for just one

person; because if there are two, then you don't waste as much time moving the ladder around. And you can encourage each other to keep going.

C. And some jobs, like cleaning gutters, are a lot safer with a second person. It's nice to have a second person to hold the ladder and go fetch stuff. Like Ecclesiastes says, "If either of them falls down, one can help the other up."

5. And two are better than one, from an emotional point of view as well.

A. "If two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone?" Of course we generate physical warmth; but we generate emotional warmth as well. And that makes such a difference! Can you remember a time when you were feeling really sad? Even something as simple as a warm smile can really lift one's spirits.

B. We all need encouragement. I've heard young children being taught to say, "I need a hug," when they feel especially sad, and I think that's great. We might never say that; but maybe sometimes we wish we could. We all have times when we really need a warm smile, an encouraging word, and maybe even a hug. And you need at least two people for any of those things to happen.

SLIDE 8

Ecclesiastes 4:12b

A cord of 3 strands is not quickly broken.

6. Again, a cord of 3 strands is not quickly broken. That's also certainly true from both a practical and an emotional point of view.

A. A cord with 3 strands is stronger than a rope with 2 strands; 3 people pulling together can haul more than 2 people.

B. Sometimes this verse is interpreted from a theological point of view. Like at wedding ceremonies, where the 3 strands are defined as the husband, the wife, and God.

C. But basically what Ecclesiastes says is, 2 together are better than 1, and 3 together are better than 2.

7. Turns out that even the NY Times agrees with Scripture in this regard.

A. On January 1, NY Times reported on an 85 years-long study of adult development, that was done by Harvard. That study went on for 3 generations and included 725 original participants and 1300 of their descendants. The idea was to find out what helps people thrive.

B. The researchers were very thorough. For 85 years they checked health records and did DNA samples and evaluated questionnaires. And what they found was – no surprise – that maintaining our relationships with other people is the best single thing we can do to improve our health and our happiness. Quote, "Strong relationships are what make for a happy life. More than wealth, IQ or social class, it's the robustness of our bonds that most determines whether we feel fulfilled."

C. They offer suggestions to help us improve our relationships with our family members, our neighbors, our co-workers, our hiking buddies, or anyone else we know.

D. All of which is fine. But there is something much better.

E. There is more to life than just “getting by with a little help from your friends.” And that “more” would be companionship with Jesus. Having Jesus himself as your friend.

F. All who belong to Jesus are blessed with companionship with Jesus himself. And there are no limits to that companionship. When Jesus walked on this earth as a human being, in his humanity he had limits. He couldn't be in every place or in every time or with every person at once. But now- well, now there are no limits. Jesus is part of the triune God – God the Son. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus can indeed be present in every place, in every time, for every person who wants his company.

G. And in fact Jesus offers more than just companionship!

a. He offers salvation.

b. He offers direction.

c. He offers growth, and transformation, and meaning, and joy.

d. And, he offers a family, where we can share all these gifts together.

SLIDE 9

Matthew 12:48-50

(Jesus) replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

8. Jesus pointed to his disciples – which include us – and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

A. Jesus is pointing to us as a church. He is pointing to each one of us as individuals as well. Look around the sanctuary. Look at the people you see here./// If you're watching the service via livestream, look at the people who are watching with you. Everyone you see is a part of Jesus' family.

B. No one who belongs to Jesus is ever alone. We are connected to him through the work of the Holy Spirit; and, we are connected to all the other members of Jesus' family through the work of the same Holy Spirit. We are not limited by space and we are not limited by time. Anyone who belongs to Jesus does the will of the Father in heaven. Anyone who does the will of Jesus' Father, is part of Jesus' family.

C. As you look around the sanctuary, you see Jesus' mother and sister and brother, many times over.

D. If you are thinking now of other followers of Jesus, who may have lived long ago or far away, you are also thinking about Jesus' mother and sisters and brothers. We may not see them; but Jesus does, because he isn't limited by time or space. Through Jesus we are still connected.

E. God said in the very beginning of creation that “It is not good for the man to be alone.” And that's why – surprise, surprise – we are happier when we are connected with other people.

a. Sin does damage our relationships, that's true; but even with the presence of sin, the fact is, that God created us to be in relationship.

b. That's why Jesus set up a family of believers. He did not set up a huge number of individuals, each one all by themselves – CS Lewis described hell that way! Jesus set up his church to be a family of believers. Here are his brothers and sisters and mothers.

9. So if God intends us to be together with one another – flawed though we are – and if in Jesus we are all part of Jesus' family, what does that mean? It means that we are there for one another.

A. For instance, contributing donuts and coffee. That sounds like a pesky detail, one more thing to sign up for and remember to do. BUT, bringing donuts and coffee line up with what Jesus wants us to do. Jesus wants us to stick together. And that's a whole lot more likely to happen if we have food and drink to share together, right? People gather to talk and connect with each other, where the food and drink is!

B. For instance, fixing things on the campus or in our homes. We've just had a major weather event. There may be water or wind damage. Remember what Ecclesiastes says about two being better than one, because they have a better return on their labor. There's likely to be a better outcome on whatever you're trying to fix, if you're not trying to fix it alone. Maybe the buildings and grounds folks could use a hand.

C. For instance, having fun together. We talked about that last week; and some great ideas have been popping up. Like the hymn sing scheduled for after church on the 15th in Room 4. Or like Pi day, which is March 14th, since Pi is 3.1415 etc etc. Maybe we could get together on March 14th and eat pie, just for fun. Like suggestions for walks, with or without dogs, in gardens or around lakes. Or like bringing coffee cake and fruit to support the teachers at Hyde Middle School.

10. Jesus' family sticks together. Let's thank God for connecting us to him and to one another. (lead prayer)