

23 January 2022

Health and Wellness

Ecclesiastes 2:1-22

This month we are considering one of the struggles of the modern era: the search for meaning in a world that has turned away from traditional religion. But this is not a new quest. A few hundred years before Christ, a Jewish teacher set out to find meaning in life, and he wrote down a sort of travelogue of his quest. We don't know his name. For part of his book he adopted the persona of Solomon – the traditional model of wisdom – but he only called himself “gatherer of the community.” The Hebrew word for community is *qahal*, so in that language his name and book are both called *Qohelet*. The Greek word for community is *ecclesia*, so when the book was translated into Greek it was called Ecclesiastes. We read from Qohelet's quest now. Ecclesiastes 2, verses 1-11.

2 I said to myself, 'Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.' But again, this also was vanity. 2 I said of laughter, 'It is mad', and of pleasure, 'What use is it?' 3 I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine—my mind still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life. 4 I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. 8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines.

9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. 10 Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Qohelet tried everything he could think of, using an inductive method, to find meaning and purpose in life. One by one he ticks the usual answers off his list: “Wisdom, pleasure, wealth, achievement, music: no, they're all empty.” The book ends with a couple of verses affirming the value of keeping of God's commandments and seeking meaning in God, but that only comes after twelve chapters of bleak frustration. This is a book about seeking, not about finding, and I love it. I think it's one of the most important books in scripture. Not because it offers enduring answers to life's questions – it doesn't – but because its presence in our Bible gives us permission to ask those questions, too.

Anyway, that's the search we're talking about this month. Where do we go to search for meaning? As I said last week, we have something inside us that instinctively believes that there is purpose and meaning in life and that belief compels us to search for that greater purpose.

Traditionally, that has meant a search for God. But what do people do if God's not an option? What if you've rejected "traditional" religion, as so many have today, but still feel that compulsion to search for meaning? Where will you look now?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BH9jP_2zmbU

For those of you who are joining us by radio, what you just heard is an advertisement for SoulCycle, which is an exercise program involving high energy stationary cycling – “spin classes” – led by inspiring coaches. It's a billion-dollar business. But what you just heard wasn't offering cardiovascular fitness, was it? It was offering salvation. It didn't use that language, of course. It talked about having a “breakthrough” experience rather than a conversion experience, but the result is the same: come to us, and you will find your soul. Find it.

In one of the most fascinating turns of 21st century religion, the Wellness Movement has taken on the trappings of religion and has become, for many, their faith. A recent study from Harvard Divinity School identified both SoulCycle and one of its competitors, CrossFit, as two of the newest religions in America. Both industries inspire fanatical devotion and an evangelistic fervor for bringing in new converts. But wellness is more than exercise, of course, and the 21st century Wellness cult involves the diet and nutrition industry, meditation (now available on an app), yoga, massage, and so on. And – hear this, now – none of these things are bad. Neither are spin class or CrossFit-style weight training. All can be helpful and healthy. And that's typical of today's idols. Most are things that are good in themselves, or at least neutral, when used appropriately. They only become idols when they are placed on our newly vacant altars and bowed down to. I'll come back to what identifies something as an idol later, but first let me describe in very general terms the theology of this new Wellness cult.

First, the purpose of this faith is self-improvement, self-actualization, self. As the evangelists on the SoulCycle ad say, “This is about you.” The entire purpose is to find your own inner strength, become your best self, discover and actualize a higher form of you. This is the goal and promise, but every faith has an enemy, and so does this one. You are surrounded by toxic influences that inhibit your journey of self and prevent your full spiritual transformation. Some of these are in your food – toxins and chemicals that you must purge from your system and avoid. You don't need their chemicals or so-called “vaccines” because your true healing is in yourself, in your own body, once it is appropriately cleansed and renewed. Then you will be truly healthy, because your health will be *natural*. These physical toxins are everywhere, placed there by evil corporations like Big Pharma and the mainstream medical establishment, who are only after your money. Do not trust them.

But it isn't just physical toxins in our environment that prevent our actualization. There are also toxic people, which means people who don't serve your needs or optimize your experience, people who doubt the power of your transformation or question your beliefs. Have nothing to do with their negative energy. To be honest, other people are of dubious value in general. You are on your own hero-quest within yourself, and other people are most likely to just get in the way. One day maybe you can think about others, but for now you must focus on yourself. Oprah calls this the airplane oxygen mask theory: you know you have to put your own mask on before you can help others. In the same way, your first spiritual task, indeed your moral duty, is self-care. Only when we are strong ourselves can we help others.

Don't tell me that's not a religion. Not only does it have leaders, high priestesses of spin, and a consistent (if not coherent) theology, but the true believers of this new faith are as fanatical as any fundamentalist sect, and just as resistant to other views. You can show the faithful that this or that nutritional claim has been debunked repeatedly, and it won't change anything. You can point out that actually everything we put into our body – including kale and guava – contains chemicals, because that's what you call collections of molecules, but don't expect them to hear you. You can wonder why they're so sure traditional medicine is only after their money, but they never consider whether that might also be true of SoulCycle or Goop, but you'd be wasting your time. Because you wouldn't be challenging an idea, you would be attacking a faith. People do not respond well to attacks on their faith.

But a dangerous, no-win faith it is, because its promises are empty, and its goal is unworthy. Its promises are empty because they are predicated on the idea that we can transform ourselves. We can't, and those who set out to do so will only be disappointed, because there's no end. How do you know when you've achieved your optimal self. There's always someone else who's thinner and stronger; that perfect self is never quite attainable. One writer on the Wellness cult calls it the love child of Ayn Rand and John Calvin: a combination of Rand's obsessive focus on yourself with Calvin's conviction you can never be good enough. But even if it *were* possible to achieve that ultimate self-fulfillment that is promised – again, it's not, but if it *were* – what would you have? You'd have a splendid self, alone and isolated and empty, because by making your imagined self your god, you cut yourself off from the things that actually point toward a valid God and bring joy: relationships, compassion, love.

Last week, talking about idolatry in general, I said that the key distinguishing mark of an idolatrous god was that it was “all about me.” So often, when you peel away the outer layers of an idolatrous religion, you discover that at its very core is a carefully constructed rationalization for selfishness. When we worship a god who tells us how wonderful we are, who advises us to do what we want to do anyway, who gives us an excuse to avoid the things and people who do not fit our lifestyle, that's not a god; that's a mirror. The idol of wellness is a barely-masked orgy of self-centeredness, and it is impossible to imagine Jesus teaching any of it.

One final question, though. If the Wellness cult is an idol, and *our* faith is real, why are people leaving us in droves and going there? It's a fair question, and it's not enough to say that it's because people want to be selfish. I think there's more for us to learn. Appalling as it was from a religious perspective, that SoulCycle video was pretty inspiring, wasn't it? It challenged us to get up and try to do and be more than we are. How much do we challenge people in the church today? We used to, you know. Nearly all the elements of wellness culture have been used as spiritual disciplines in Christianity: fasting, self-denial, physical challenges (for instance, in the form of pilgrimages), meditation. St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits and a former military man, wrote a book called *Spiritual Exercises* that's a sort of boot camp for Christians, and it's all in there – plus a lot more. The difference between those exercises and modern wellness, though, is that in Christianity these disciplines were designed to *remove* our fixation on ourselves so that we could be open to God and to others. What would happen if we tried challenging people that way? We stopped doing it, I think, because we were afraid we would run people off if we asked too much of them, but maybe some are leaving because we ask too little. Worth considering.

For now, though, be glad that we have a God, not an idol, a God who isn't all about us and who will never fit our lifestyle and who expects more from us than we usually give – but who still gives more to us than we ever expect. That's a God to worship.