

Celebrating Disciples: *Ecclesiastes 3:1-13*

Norwalk Christian Church, August 16, 2015, Disciples Together Series, 12th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15, Year B

What a fun time of year this is. Summer is coming to an end, and the school year will very soon begin. The corn in the fields is getting very tall, and harvest season will be right around the corner. Our gardens are bursting at the seams, and the table outside this sanctuary will remain full with fresh produce from our church family gardens for several more weeks.

And, of course, it's State Fair season. We haven't gone yet, but we will, soon enough, and several times. Maybe today. I feel like I know what I'm doing this year. The layout is more clear. I know where the good lemonade is, and I can't wait to taste again my favorite deep fried foods on a stick. We will certainly check out the birthing barn. We found it too late last year, and pretty much everything but a few chicks were already born. And of course, we can't miss the butter cow with her accompanying monopoly sculpture, which our church children helped carve this year!

It's an amazing place; an amazing time of year.

And I got me thinking: The State Fair and the Church have a lot in common.

Yes, yes. I know what you're thinking. Sometimes the church can feel like you're stuck in the middle of the swine barn, but that's not what I mean.

The tradition of State Fairs goes back to 1841, when the first State Fair in the U.S. was held in Syracuse, New York, The Great New York State Fair, which continues to be held annually. But we all know the most famous State Fair is our own Iowa State Fair.

Begun in 1852, the Iowa State Fair is a national treasure. According to its own website, "the Iowa State Fair is a unique institution, serving to educate, inform and entertain people from all walks of life." Consistently listed as one of the must-see events in the country, people from all over the world travel each year to see it all. But when you think about it, it's really nothing special.

I mean, the main attractions are livestock and produce. The rides are various forms of spinning you until you puke. Fairs can get dirty at times, and it's usually hot. The paths are dusty and crowded. The political candidates, too many.

And yet, it's amazing! At its best, the Fair is about celebrating life. Birth and harvest. Creativity and art. Food and drink. Talent and treasures. Everywhere you look, life is celebrated. And where else can you receive a blue ribbon for a squash?

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up....

The Iowa State Fair is the *time* to celebrate it all.

I love this quote: “In 1881, historian James Wilson noted that, ‘One of the most valuable effects of the State Fair is the fraternizing, humanizing consequences of bringing our people together...No one meets and mingles with 20,000 Iowa men, women and children on the Fairgrounds – the only place they can be brought together – without growth of sympathy.’ Certainly, this is even more relevant today, when the pace of modern life tends to isolate individuals even more from their neighbors.”

At the fair, all are welcome, and everyone can come as they are. And do they ever. Best people-watching in the world, hands down! But no one, Wilson says, can mingle with that many people, without growing in their sympathy for their neighbor.

Yes, the State Fair and the Church, have a lot in common.

Now, the words of our text today from the book of Ecclesiastes are much, much older than the State Fair tradition, but I can imagine the writer of these words would’ve loved the fair. We don’t know who the writer of Ecclesiastes is. Tradition has said it was Solomon, but the writer identifies himself simply as “The Preacher.” Who ever she is, the writer knows a lot about life.

The book is filled with wisdom that only comes from a person who has journeyed through the ups and downs of life. These words were written by calloused hands, on the pages of experience. We may know our text today because of a 60s era song by the Byrds, which goes to show you how timeless these words are, still fresh for today.

I can imagine quoting these words as you walk around the Iowa State Fair. To everything, there is a season. Life is filled with many seasons. The good and the bad. The ups and downs. The ebbs and flows. And joy--true joy--is found when we observe all these seasons, finding pleasure in all of life’s celebrations and toils.

This text is much older than fairs and also older than church, too. But celebrating the seasons of life: this is what church does best.

From baby showers, to birthdays. Weddings. Anniversaries. Graduation. New jobs. Retirement. And death.

In the church, we dedicate babies and baptize youth as they begin to take on a faith of their own. We bless couples with the Christian sacrament of marriage. We lay to rest our deceased sisters and brothers in funeral and memorial services.

In the church, we celebrate all the seasons of life. We carry each other's problems. We cannot live this life together without growing in our sympathy for one another.

When our sister in church has cancer, we suffer with her. When our brother in church is lying on his death bed, we suffer with him. We cry when new babies are born. When one of our church family is sick, we are right beside them in the hospital bed with their biological family. We give gifts to graduates, as if they were our own children. We surround one another when our marriages end. We answer the phone in the middle of the night when a church friend calls to talk, because they don't know who else to call.

And Marti and I are blessed to have a front row seat to it all. We get to see you in all your beauty, surrounding one another through good times and bad. That's why I like that the writer of Ecclesiastes calls herself, "The Preacher". Not that preachers are more wise...though I'm told we only get wiser after 35...but because preachers get a front row seat to all the seasons of life.

We've been in the room when your parent breathed their last. Marti and I, sometimes within a week's span, get to see all the various seasons of life, and let me tell you, there is a time for every season under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to weep, and a time to laugh. And all the seasons, in their own way, are beautiful.

To celebrate the seasons of life doesn't mean we wash over them with pretend joy, suppressing our true feelings. To celebrate is to experience the true emotion of the season. To cry when you must cry, and laugh when you must laugh. To open up your heart to the raw, uncensored, emotional experience of being human. To breathe in, and then let it all out.

We have forgotten how to celebrate. Our society is so fast-paced, we do not give ourselves the time to stop and celebrate the seasons of life. We are conditioned to suppress our feelings. Our world needs celebrating disciples.

How weird and wonderful, for a bunch of strangers like us, to come together and say to one another, we're doing life together. State Fairs may celebrate life once a year, but the Church celebrates life in all its fullness every day.

When you suffer, I suffer. When you rejoice, I rejoice. No matter the season of your life, you do not have to do it alone. We celebrate together. We walk through it all together.

And I wonder, if some of you may need your church family right now? Maybe you're going through something that you haven't shared? You're doing it alone, and it's killing you.

You don't have to. We are in this together. We may get a lot wrong as church. We are not perfect. But celebrating all of life together--this is what we do best.

The preacher of Ecclesiastes ends our text this way: “I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.”

Through tears and smiles, we eat and drink and live together, taking pleasure in all life’s joys and toils. We need to celebrate. For there is nothing better than this life together.

Amen.