

Wisdom from the Butter Cow: *Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23*

Norwalk Christian Church, August 12, 2019, State Fair Sunday, Proper 14 (text from Proper 13), Year C

This butter chalice was the hit of General Assembly! So many selfies taken. Thank you to Sarah Pratt for sharing your talent and fun with our General Assembly, and for letting us enjoy this work of art on our State Fair Sunday!

And I'll be the first to admit, it's all a bit...um...cheesy. But I'm not even margarine-ly kidding here, our Disciples family from around the globe were very impressed with the butter chalice. It was chilling. Moooooving. And just udderly fun. I'm really churning out the butter puns, aren't I? I may be milking it a bit too much. Dairy I do more? I probably should've...spread...them out throughout the sermon, instead of...sticking...them all in the same spot. You're probably thinking about the puns...I Can't believe it's not...better. Alright, alright. No more-nure jokes.

But it really was a hit at General Assembly. A frequent question was, what happens to the butter after it's all over. Marti and I shared that this chalice is made of Sarah's own butter stash, which is several years old. But the Butter Cow itself, and it's annual friends, are made from butter that is currently 14-years-old. That's some old, stinky butter. (And if you want a sniff, maybe open this cooler door after worship).

You might have seen shared on Facebook or on a recent flight, the story about the Iowa State Dairy Queen from Southwest Magazine, our own Sarah Pratt. I just think it's so cool that people flying all around the country are reading about Sarah and the Butter Cow. And it's a really good article, too.

It talks about this history, Sarah's, the Butter Cow at the Iowa State Fair, and butter sculpting in general.

It might actually be appropriate for us to have a butter sculpture in worship today, for the first humans to sculpt butter were monks. Tibetan buddhist monks, actually. They have, for centuries, carved sacred figures out of butter. It was originally seen as something sacred and special. In other places, the wealthy would carve sculptures out of butter and other food as a sign of excess and extravagance.

But as the Southwest Airlines Magazine article writes, "It was in the U.S. that butter sculptures become more egalitarian symbols." No longer on the tables of the wealthy, they were democratized and brought to local festivals and fairs, so that everyone can enjoy it. For the industry, it's a way to showcase the product, sponsored by the dairy farmers. But for those who have seen the butter cow, year after year, it's a way of connecting to their childhood, to memories, and to pure fun and to pass the tradition on.

When we told some friends we were coming to Norwalk to interview, they were rooting for us to get the job so we could be close to the Butter Cow. And, I'll be honest, when they said it, we didn't know what the Butter Cow was! But we soon learned, and that very first weekend in Iowa, we even met Sarah. And now, we're passing the tradition on. It was a joy last year, bringing our friends from L.A. to see the butter cow for the first time.

Though we came to this a lot later than you, there is, as Sarah says in the article, this mystique about it. Even though butter sculpting has been around for centuries.

But isn't it something, that here we line up for 10 days to see this cow. And then, on day eleven, it's taken apart, clump by clump, and shoved into buckets. The art that took so long to perfect, and was viewed and photographed, admired and praised, now unceremoniously dismantled.

It reminds me of the text Roger Miller read for us today. The book of Ecclesiastes is said to be written by the Ecclesiastus, which means preacher. And this text, in particular, sounds like a grumpy, retired preacher. I'm not saying you were typed-casted into the role, Roger. We just knew you were a good actor! :-)

This ancient preacher nails it, though. "It is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish?"

Have you ever felt like that before? Something you pour your life into, that you work at, that you perfect, and then, it's just discarded? Unappreciated? No one cares the time you put into it. The kids are unappreciative of all you do.

It could be a volunteer project, a craft or work of art. A meal. An act of affection towards your spouse. A carefully picked out birthday gift that is thrown aside for the next wrapped gift. A sermon no one listens to. A song someone forgets.

Maybe it's something bigger, like your life's work. Years of work for a company that gives you a certificate upon retirement, and then moves on. Maybe it's the family farm. Over a century it's been in the family, but no one cares anymore. It's destined to be another shopping center or more rows of cookie-cutter homes. A life-long collection, sold for pennies by the children at the estate sale. A church that people worked so hard to build, that closes down for good.

We stay up at night worrying about these things, the old preacher says. Yet no one cares. It will all be forgotten. Why even try? All is vanity. Worthless. Meaningless. Vanity.

Or is it? August 19th, the Butter Cow will be disassembled. The butter packed away into buckets. Butter Big Bird, towering for 10 days, reduced to clumps. Butter Ernie and Butter Bert, gone, now as worthless as Bert's bottle cap collection.

What is even the point?!

I was on team Ecclesiastes, I was beginning to develop, myself, a case of early-onset, grumpy, old preacher...but then, well then, I learned from the wisdom of the Butter Cow.

Every year, she comes to bring us joy. And then, she's gone. But even when she's in a bucket in the cooler, her frame still remains. Each year, the new cow is born from the skeleton of the old.

In the article, Sarah says, "We talk about ephemeral art as part of the class I teach. I think it's essential. We talk about resiliency and the act of being able to let something go. It's not going to be permanent. That's the nature of butter sculptures. We build them, and then the next day we tear them down, and we build something else."

It's the nature of butter sculptures...but Sarah, I think you've summed up the nature of life so much better than that ancient, grumpy, old preacher.

All is vanity! the old, grumpy preacher declares. But what does the butter cow say?

All may be temporary, but that doesn't mean it has no value. The ancient preacher, I believe, gets it all wrong.

The things in life that really matter--these are temporary. They may outlast us, but only barely. Every old, family farm becomes something else. Every home will be gone eventually. Every piece of art, no matter how long it is preserved, will become ephemeral, transient, fleeting. All of life--all of human existence--is momentary.

But that doesn't make it vanity, worthless. That is what makes it beautiful.

That someone can sculpt Big Bird out of butter! Spend so much time making Oscar the Grouch as Hannah did--that is beautiful. That is the mystique. Not that it lasts, but that it ever existed in the first place.

These last few days, I tell you, it has been overwhelming hearing about the mass shootings. The lives of those lost. When that news story ends, there will be another. Story after story of brokenness in our world. So much that needs to be done. So much left to do.

It's overwhelming sometimes. How can our small effort make a difference? You pour so much time into it, but for what?

The Butter Cow teaches us that all of life is Ephemeral, and that's what makes it so very beautiful. These little things. Your work. Your art. Your career. Your talent. Your dreams. Your wishes. They are not vanity. Though they may be underappreciated, temporary, and maybe even, one day, forgotten, they are beautiful, and they matter.

That we, everyday, ordinary people, could have an impact in this world--if even on one person. That we could bring about joy. To correct a wrong. To change one life--that is what makes life worth living.

So, to the old, grumpy preacher, we say, get over yourself. All is not vanity!

And to the Butter Cow, we say, thank you! Thank you for teaching us, as the old song says, that everything is beautiful, in its own way.

That everyday, it's as if we're given a clump of butter in our hands. What will we make of it today? It may feel like we're starting over, but we're building upon the bones of those who have gone before us. We are continuing in the long-line of sculptors who have made beautiful things out of their lives. And like old butter spread out on an armature, the possibilities are endless.

We don't always know what impact we may have on this world. But we do the work anyway. We make the art. Because the very act of doing so is what brings beauty and love into this world.

Besides, it's not all up to us anyway. And so we place these gifts into the hands of the master Sculptor, the creator of all that is and will be, who will bless our work, and through us, craft this world--and us along with it--into something so very, very beautiful. Amen.