Sabbath, Life Savoring, and Other Hints About God

Ken Wilson 7.30.17

Emily began this series on Sabbath and Savoring Life. Gist is this: **Sabbath** command is born of God's desire that we have space to savor life. The idea of **savoring** implies focused intention. I tend to wolf down desserts, I like 'em so much. Every now and then I'll be like "Actually, what happened to my dessert?" It's just gone and I can't believe I didn't enjoy it more.

Last Sunday Emily taught from **Ecclesiastes**—a strange/delightful book. Author wrestles with how meaningless-fleeting (like a vapor) life can be. **There's enough unavoidable suffering in life so eat, drink, and be happy when the opportunity presents itself**. Enjoy your work as much as you can. This is the light in the gloom of Ecc.

This life-savoring perspective is obscured by some weird ways we think about God. There's a way of doing faith that **enhances** our life savoring, but also a way that **deadens** our life savoring.

In the Adam (=humanity) story of Gen 2-3, humans find them-selves in a garden with God as their neighbor. They are in a child-like state. Their neighbor God identifies two trees at the center of the garden: tree of life and the knowledge of good and evil.

Given the explosion of life in all its forms in Genesis 1, **tree of life** seems to represent participating in the wonder of being alive, something we share with every living creature, every life form.
Odd thing is this other tree seems to represent stuff that we're supposed to care a lot about especially if we are into God.
Knowledge of good and evil, right? Seems like religion in a way.

Isn't that same as God? Well no. Because their neighbor in the garden who is God, says stay away the fruit of that tree—it will only keep you from life.

This story is so important Israel has a never-ending debate about what it might possibly mean. A Jew named Paul, who became a follower of the Jew named Jesus wrote a letter to very early house churches in Rome. This letter can be read as an extended midrash [interpretation] of the Adam story.

In Ro 8, Paul says God wants to bring us into "***the glorious freedom of the children of God."*** Direct echo the Adam story: in that story, the first 3 words to the humans (before they got fancy and ate from tree of knowledge of good-evil) are ***"You are free!" ["You are free to eat from any tree of the garden, but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat for the day you do you die."*** Gen. 2: 16-17]

This seems to be a warning against something many would say is the primary concern of religion. Startling opening to the Bible!

Today, focus on two under-appreciated aspects of the glorious freedom of the children of God. What I'm calling religion doesn't promote these. So they signal this life-savoring path involving God.

The first freedom is principled dissent.

50th anniversary of civil disturbance in Detroit. Age 15, living on NW side, white side. Helicopters overhead, armored vehicles and tanks in convoy down 8 mile, but I watched what everyone in my neighborhood called the riots on TV. Recent attempts to de-legitimize the press, inspired me to WP and Michigan Chronicle. MC is a Detroit's paper run by African Americans. Saw story after story about **'67 Rebellion**. Not riot, rebellion. That term is a principled dissent of majority view: Characterizing what I learned to call the Detroit riots as an explosion of rage by people under the thumb of white supremacy run riot.
Principled dissent is a glorious freedom of the children of God.

Bible includes voices of principled dissent re majority views reflected in the Bible. Song of Songs is a principled dissent against the gender hierarchy that much of the Bible assumes. Ecclesiastes is part of the Wisdom literature, including Job and

Proverbs. 2 of those 3 are principled dissent of the wisdom consensus represented in Proverbs, Psalms and many other places in Scripture. Directly contradicts it. Letter of James is principled dissent from writings of Paul on justification.

Gentile Christianity (what most cut teeth on) is horrible on principled dissent. We call it heresy. Big improvement that we just exclude people and get snarky on FB rather than burn dissenters at stake. S…l…o…w p…r…o…g…r…e…s…s.

Freedom of principled dissent is a move we can make with God. Abraham exercised it, prophets, its depicted in Jonah story. Tree of life allows it, knowledge of good and evil, not so much.

I went thru what now seems ridiculously long process of changing my mind on LGBTQ. But in my gut, before I did all my midrash (work of interpretation) I knew that if I couldn't find a way through the Bible on this—if I concluded all the clobber texts applied as-is to LGBTQ people—I would practice civil disobedience to what I thought the Bible taught. (Civil disobedience is when you disobey a legitimate authority in order to honor your own conscience.)

I think God respects such a move.

I think God is more interested in engagement than in compliance especially **secretly resentful compliance** (the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son).

Second aspect of the glorious freedom of the children of God:
the freedom to receive, nurture, and pursue happiness.

If you google **"happiness and Judaism"** you see all this great stuff—the 9 Hebrew words for happiness, sayings of the rabbis like
"happiness itself is our service to God." A leader in the field of positive psychology (study of happiness) saying "many of the idea quote unquote discovered by modern psychologist, had actually been present for thousands o years in traditional Jewish sources."
[what a fun series that would be…]

If you google **"happiness and Christianity"** you get all these articles that are suspicious of happiness—want to draw a sharp distinction between happiness from joy, warn against the wrong kind of happiness, assert happiness is not the goal, etc. Here's one by Eugene Peterson titled, **The Pursuit of Happiness is a Dead End**. (Better article than title, but CT editor who wrote the headline had this bias]

Anyone know what I'm talking about?
A religious suspicion of pursuing happiness?

And yes, we all know people who make short-sighted moves in the name of happiness—usually to get relief from some difficult situation—only to make themselves or others more miserable in the longer run. We find such people in the mirror.

But this fear of the pursuit of happiness is, I think, a sure mark of religion not a life savoring God connection. It's fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, not tree of life.

If you have experience religious oppression you will feel the difference in your bones.

Emily mentioned to you in her story that when she met Rachel and was like, *Oh-Oh, I'm in love—what do I do now,* she broke news to me and I broke down and cried in her office. The reason I broke down and cried in her office was not "Oh-oh, the bleep is about to hit the fan." It's that I saw something in her face—a happiness that I hadn't seen before and I felt as though I were looking at Emily for the first time. I was so happy for her.

As long as we're getting personal: A year or so earlier I met Julia, 7 months after Nancy died. I was like, *Oh-oh, I like her, is that OK?*
Paul Sonda, who lost his first wife Ellen and then married Diane, had told me that should I ever remarry, I would lose friends over it, and I would not be able to predict who those friends would be. I thought, "You don't know my friends." He was absolutely right.

The church I served at the time was rallying around me as a suddenly aggrieved widow and many other people processing their grief at losing Nancy who was also a pastor. People grieve in different ways, different levels of intensity and at their own pace.
I knew if I got involved with someone this would complicate their grief. I knew it would complicate the grief of some of my kids. I knew it would throw an emotional wrench in a dicey change process with no margin for error.

But without going into details too personal to share, it was as if God picked me up by the collar—like in a mobster movie—and said, **"I want you to be happy. This is your business and nobody else's. Proceed."**

One of Hebrew words for happiness is *sasson*: a sudden, unexpected happiness. I stumbled across a poem by Jane Kenyon (AA Pioneer alum). Read *Happiness*, by Jane Kenyon.

Happiness by Jane Kenyon

There's just no accounting for happiness,
or the way it turns up like a prodigal
who comes back to the dust at your feet
having squandered a fortune far away.

And how can you not forgive?
You make a feast in honor of what
was lost, and take from its place the finest
garment, which you saved for an occasion
you could not imagine, and you weep night and day
to know that you were not abandoned,
that happiness saved its most extreme form
for you alone.

No, happiness is the uncle you never
knew about, who flies a single-engine plane
onto the grassy landing strip, hitchhikes
into town, and inquires at every door
until he finds you asleep midafternoon
as you so often are during the unmerciful
hours of your despair. [Kenyon suffered long bouts depression]

It comes to the monk in his cell.
It comes to the woman sweeping the street
with a birch broom, to the child
whose mother has passed out from drink.
It comes to the lover, to the dog chewing
a sock, to the pusher, to the basket maker,
and to the clerk stacking cans of carrots
in the night.
It even comes to the boulder
in the perpetual shade of pine barrens,
to rain falling on the open sea,
to the wineglass, weary of holding wine.

I think Kenyon would have identified with author or Ecclesiastes.
We do spend much of our life in a state of existential misery…things happen that *make no sense*.

If the **treasures of happiness** are buried in this world, it's a minefield and we traverse it at midnight, blindfolded.

This is Kenyon stirring herself to look for happiness like a poet looks for beauty, like a photographer noticing that those weeds at the side of the road are actually quite lovely.

This is Kenyon stirring herself to receive the advances of happiness when they come, to nurture happiness, coax it stay a while.

Beneath the poem, I think, is a vision of God not unlike Adam and Eve's neighbor in the garden, wanting them to go for life where life presents itself.

QUIET REFLECTION

One the skills for savoring life is noticing and appreciating the little things or the assumed big things that make life good.

The word "ecstasy" means standing outside yourself. Like our inner world is grinding away at avoiding threats, acquiring what we need, etc. But meanwhile we're participating in something much bigger all around us. So, savoring life involves the skill of pausing to notice and appreciate. For me if it's eating a good dessert—it's taking the first bite, then putting down my fork and saying out loud, wow, that's good.

Suggest taking some quiet time in search three such things [write them down on half sheet?]