

From
A Service of Witness to the Resurrection
for
Ann Pollitt (1938-2021)

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Knowing that we would hear from the book of Ecclesiastes this morning, my thoughts went back to a time in seminary. It was in a class on worship and that day's focus was preparing for and then conducting funerals and memorial services. Pastors are sometimes asked to officiate at services for people we never knew. Putting the service together is a bit of challenge when you don't know someone's faith. And many questions surface. Did they really want a service conducted by a minister or is it the wish of the family? Sometimes it's the funeral director who calls when there are no family members to make arrangements. How did they feel about the church? What was their relationship with Christ? Did they have shallow roots in the Christian tradition or were they lifelong disciples or followers of the Way? What about hymns? What about prayers? What about scripture? I remember the professor saying that Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 is a safe choice, as it says little about the faith of the person. Instead, it simply describes things as they are. There is a time for this... and a time for that.... A time to be born and a time to die. For everything there is a season. This is just the way it is whether one has faith or not, whether one believes in God or not. It's not a soaring credo like, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth..." (Job 19:25). Or "If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8). Or "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers...nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). Ecclesiastes 3 is nothing like that.

When I think of Ecclesiastes 3 in relation to Ann, or, better, think of Ann and then read Ecclesiastes 3, or imagine Anne uttering these words, the text is, somehow, transfigured in my hearing. Instead of it being a safe choice for someone who's faith is in question, I hear this text and think of Ann and the way that she lived her life, lived out her faith, a faith that was never in question. Questioning—for sure. Full of doubts, absolutely. But alive and real.

The book of Ecclesiastes was written at a time when Hellenism, that is Greek culture, philosophy, and worldview, seeped deep into Judaism. The Greek philosophical tradition, its love (*philos*) for wisdom (*sophia*), its *philosophy*, was obsessed with the question: what is required for a meaningful life? And what kind of wisdom is needed for such a life and to guide us through such a life? Ecclesiastes, especially this chapter, offers wisdom for living, for what is real, and practical. It gets down to basics, to brass tacks, as it were; this is the way that it is. Get your thoughts out of the clouds and get real. Don't get distracted by flights of theological ecstasy. Sure, there is a time and place for everything, including theological ecstasy, but make sure you use your time wisely, live wisely.

I got to know Ann and David after they moved to Charlestown and started to come to worship here. Before that, I knew David as a friend and highly regarded colleague in the presbytery. And I got to know Ann and David best on Sunday mornings during our adult education hour before worship. They were there most weeks, whatever the topic or theme of the day. They were curious, engaged, committed to the work of the church, to Christ, to the gospel's call to peacemaking and social justice. Ann had a no-nonsense way about her. She had a way of cutting through a discussion and calling us to the core of things, bringing us back to what really matters. She didn't have patience for some of the zaniness of the church, as well as in the presbytery—and she was not afraid to tell you. Let's be *practical*. I can almost hear her saying the word. *Practicality*. This is what matters.... This.... Don't waste my time.... Time is precious.... There's a time to live and to die and in that time between there's a lot of work that needs to be done, there's good news to be preached, and a world to love, there's justice that needs doing, people are hurting, people in pain that need more than sympathy, requiring kindness, empathy, requiring something of us, that we care, care enough to act, that we actually do something. Work. Practical. It's pretty simple what life is about. Why do we like to make everything so complicated? And we Presbyterians love to make things complicated.

Just love people. "This is my commandment," Jesus said, "...that you love one another as I have loved you," (John 15:12). If you abide in love, in his love, in God's love for the world, God's love will abide in us. And Jesus said this to us, gave us this deep wisdom, "so that my joy," he said, "may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11).

Love and joy. That's a good way to think of Ann and her life, her love for her children and family, her love for all people, the joy she found in loving and serving God's people, her love for the church—despite its many flaws. She had an inside view of what ministry in the church can be like, both the burdens and joys of parish life. Still, she knew that the church can be an extraordinary force of good in this world, a force of love and a source of joy—when the church is really being the church. Her love and joy were strong, determined. Her faith was strong, practical, alive, growing even to the end of her life, still exploring, still listening for the Word of God to shape her and move her and challenge her to live, to love, to serve.

It's a life that culminates with gratitude. As we like to say in the Reformed tradition, it's all about grace and gratitude. Everything flows from God's grace and grace stirs and calls forth from within us enormous gratitude, gratitude that opens the human heart to be open to God's grace flowing toward us which elicits even more gratitude. Grace and gratitude. Giving and thanksgiving. Our closing hymn this morning beautifully reflects this claim: "Let all things now living a song a thanksgiving to God our Creator triumphantly raise, who fashioned and made us, protected and stayed us, by guiding us on to the end of our days."¹

Today we give thanks for Ann's life and love and joy and grace. Ann's life was a thank-offering. Today, we can take comfort in knowing that she abides in the light and grace of God.

¹ "Let All Things Now Living." Text by Katherine K. Davis, 1939; Tune: ASH GROVE, a Welsh folk melody. *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).