

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:11
Pop Spirituality: "Satisfaction"
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Our song for this morning is one of the most covered songs of all time – Can't get no Satisfaction by the Rolling Stones. One site put the total number at 351 recorded cover versions. VH1 has given their ranking of the 50 best, including covers by bands as diverse as Aretha Franklin, Bjork, The Supremes, Bruce Springsteen, Devo, Otis Redding, The Grateful Dead, and Brittany Spears. There's something about this song that resonates deeply. It speaks to the deep longing of the human soul to find fulfillment, and to the frequent futility of that search. This song itself could easily be a cover of an entire book of the Bible: the book of Ecclesiastes. We are going to dive right in today, and listen to both Bible and song back to back. We'll start with Ecclesiastes.

- **Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:11**
 - This is the Word of the Lord; *thanks be to God*
- **Video:** Satisfaction, Rolling Stones

True confession time: earlier this week, I was writing a different sermon. I was taking us through a comparison of the lyrics of our song with the book of Ecclesiastes (which, as I'm sure you noticed, are very similar). They both look for satisfaction and meaning in life in a variety of places: knowledge, possessions, accomplishments, and pleasure. They both conclude that those things don't ultimately lead to satisfaction. I was exploring what that looks like in our lives, and frankly, the more I wrote, the more I felt unsatisfied.

The thing is, I think we all know that these things can't satisfy. There's never an end to the books to read or knowledge to gain. Even if we could figure it all out, we have no control over what other people think or how they behave. There are many people today who can tell you how frustrating it is that no matter how they try to fire the imaginations of others, how few listen let alone make any real changes. Or how many stories are there of the person who is rich and miserable? How many studies show that no matter how much money you make, everyone thinks if they had just a little more, then they'd be happy? There's always something new to buy to fix your life and give the perfectly curated image of who we are. Or, how many stories do we know of ambition and accolades leaving people feeling empty? After we accomplish something, we might sit back and appreciate the work of our hands, but we have to start again soon after, always chasing more. Most of life turns out to be not big accomplishments, but the mundane maintenance tasks: brushing teeth, doing the

laundry, driving to appointments, paying the bills. Pleasures do abound in this world, and we are built to appreciate them. Ecclesiastes even encourages us six different times to eat, drink, and find enjoyment in our work, because they are the gifts of God. But pleasures don't last. They end up turning us more toward ourselves. Deep down, we know all this.

A quick internet search on “how do I find satisfaction in life?” will bring up a list of helpful suggestions on improving your mental health and happiness. Top habits include: exercise, sleep, practice gratitude, declutter your home, see friends, get into nature, give back, spend time by yourself, reflect on life regularly, reevaluate your goals, take care of your body, practice mindfulness, find engaging work, get a pet, and even engage in your religion. These are all good and helpful things – many of them line up with the practices of the faith we've been talking about this year: community, generosity, solitude, service, and more.

Here's the thing, even those excellent practices, done faithfully and consistently, will fail to satisfy the deepest parts of our souls if our end goal is mental health or happiness or satisfaction. We're aimed at the wrong thing. We end up making idols, what Timothy Keller defines as “good things [turned] into ultimate things.”

And we know the right church answer to where we CAN find satisfaction. Cue the Sunday school answer to everything: Jesus! We sang about it earlier: “I searched the world, but it couldn't fill me. Man's empty praise and treasures that fade are never enough. Then you came along and put me back together. And every desire is now satisfied here in your love. Oh, there's nothing better than you.”

And yet we still resonate with the Rolling Stones. At least, I know I do. I'm willing to bet you find yourself there too. We still try and we try and we try and we try, and we can't get no, no satisfaction. We still find ourselves seeking the praise and treasures, even though we know they fade. With the Teacher in Ecclesiastes, we still experience that life is *hevel*. This is a great Hebrew word. It is often translated as “vanity” or “meaningless”, but it literally means smoke, or vapor. It's used 38 times in Ecclesiastes as a metaphor for the nature of life – that life is temporary and fleeting. When you try to hold on to it, you can't. Life is unpredictable and mysterious, like chasing after the wind. You might think you've found the key to the good life, but it turns out that life doesn't cooperate with our plans.

So what do we do with this? I can't help but think of the U2 song, *Still Haven't Found*. In it, Bono tells us of all the amazing things he's done, experiences he's had, even the religious experiences and his belief that the kingdom is coming and that the cross has carried all his shame. And he still hasn't found what he's looking for. This is a troubling thought, because

he seems to know the answer. And so do I; I know that the only one who can truly satisfy is the living God. And yet, I still have those same feelings, that I'm still searching. Shouldn't those feelings go away after we believe? Am I failing when I do feel them?

One of the most courageous things we can do in life is to ask this question: what is it that I truly want? Giving an honest answer to that is super personal and vulnerable. Do we actually want God above all else? Or does it turn out that I just want the benefits, not God himself? Do I want God because I want assurance that I have it right? Do I want God because I want the perfect outward appearance? Do I want God because I want to do important, significant things? Do I want God because he can give me all the benefits and blessings of a good life? Or do I want God? In a great little book called *With*, Skye Jethani says, "we shouldn't be surprised that when we fixate on what we can attain from God, we fail to experience the peace of his presence in our lives."

Satisfaction is a wonderful thing, but true lasting satisfaction is a byproduct, not the goal. We get in trouble when we hold *anything* up in place of God as our greatest good, when God becomes the means to some other end, even if that end is finding satisfaction in life. If we want satisfaction more than we want God, we will never find any kind of satisfaction that lasts. The call of the crucified and risen Christ on our lives is to lose our life in order to find it.

Over many years, I've been learning to see these bouts of dissatisfaction less as failures, and more as invitations. In her book *Sacred Rhythms*, Ruth Haley Barton describes our longings and desires as the beginning of the spiritual journey. If we let them, those unmet longings can draw us closer to Jesus. If we pay attention, those rumblings of discontent and restlessness will help us get past our surface layers and down into the good stuff. Here's what Ruth Haley Barton has to say: "The stirring of spiritual desire indicates that God's Spirit is already at work within us, drawing us to himself. We love God because he first loved us. We long for God because he first longed for us. We reach for God because he first reached for us. Nothing in the spiritual life originates with us. It all originates with God."

So, true confessions round two: what you've been hearing is the third sermon of the week. The second sermon I wrote was more of a testimony of faith, where I traced so many of the times God has stirred up in me a sense of dissatisfaction, of desire for more, of hungering and thirsting, and through those times drawn me deeper toward him. I wanted to see where God had been loving and reaching for me before I ever reached for him. While it was a lovely exercise for me to look back and see the big patterns of my life, it too was just filling up with more and more words, and getting less satisfactory as I went. So if you want to hear my life story, let's go for a walk or sit down over tea and we can hear from each other. For now, I just want to share one section of my life – the most recent one.

A little over a year ago, Pastor Rob was leading a class on the book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Peter Scazzero. I couldn't take the class, but I did read the book. One chapter describes the various stages in the journey of faith, and there I encountered The Wall. The Wall can have many causes: a big life change or crisis, grief or disappointment, a desire that goes unmet. You know you've reached it when God seems far away, when the practices of faith don't seem to be working, when you can't see what God is doing, and everything seems fruitless and bare. It's a *hevel* time, a "can't get no satisfaction" kind of time. St. John of the Cross calls it "the dark night of the soul." I realized that I was at such a Wall, and had been there for a while.

For me, it wasn't caused by one particular event. It was a variety of things piled on top of each other: dealing with the choice to change from full time employment to being a stay at home mom, parenting two young kids through a pandemic, the stress of carrying most of the home life while Nels' job was in a season that was taking up huge amounts of time and energy, and over all of that, in general feeling really worn down. It was a dry time, and I was having a really hard time finding God in it. My belief hadn't changed; I was still singing in the choir and serving in the church; I still had the right answers at the ready. But I was feeling lonely, and sad, and stagnant.

Here's an entry from my journal at that time: "I've been holding onto a lot of things, trying to do them on my own. I've been defeated about a lot of things. Feeling overwhelmed and like there's no way through. You are the God who makes a way through the sea, who says "peace" to the storm. I'm a little frustrated and angry that things don't change. That you haven't fixed it for me. I want the magic wishes. The quick fix that actually lasts. I don't want to do the real work. It takes so long. I want the results, the rest, the relaxing, the celebration. I know it takes being on top of a things all the time, and it's exhausting. I already carry so much." Maybe you've been there too.

The Wall is not unusual. Scazzero and St. John of the Cross say that it's "the ordinary way" that God brings us into what comes next. For me, it was a time of realizing how unsatisfied I was and how much I longed for change. It started a slow process of facing the ways I've turned to other things for satisfaction. I've been listening to all the podcasts, reading all the books, seeking to solve the issue with the right ideas. I've been trying to fill my time with volunteering, trying to get back some of what I lost when my world filled up with dishes and diapers and kid activities. I've been facing the ways my inner toddler comes out and says "I don't wanna" to the daily hard work of healthy habits. And so the Wall became my invitation to let go of the ways I distract myself with comfort and hurry.

During this past Lent, the kids decided that they wanted to give up screen time (their idea!), and in solidarity, I joined them. Wow, was it revealing. Suddenly, I didn't know what to do

with myself. I didn't know how to rest. I didn't even know what I enjoyed. Everything seemed like work. I knew that what I needed was God. This was right after we did the Practicing the Way Course here at Rose Hill, and the practice of solitude seemed like just the right avenue into the presence of God. The practice is aimed at setting aside time to just be with God. There is no pressure to accomplish anything. No trying is required. You just come and when your mind wanders (and it does), bring your attention back to God. It's a chance to bring our whole selves before God, desires and dissatisfaction and all.

Parker Palmer describes our souls like wild animals in the forest. If you want this shy creature to come out, you need to be still and silent. It's hard, and sometimes we are scared of what we might look like when our true self comes out.

I'm not sure where you find yourself this morning; where you have been trying and trying to find some satisfaction. Where you are frustrated that you keep returning to what you know doesn't satisfy. I was drawn to this song because it has described large portions of my life. St. Augustine, one of the great theologians and fathers of the early church, describes the human condition well when he says, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

This is what we are made for – to be with God. Of course we won't find satisfaction in anything else. I think God uses both the moments we do enjoy some peace and the moments we can't find any at all to draw us to him. He is ever calling us "further up and further in" to himself.

This all makes me think of the prophet Hosea. He was called to marry a promiscuous woman as a lived picture of how unfaithful Israel had been to the Lord. This woman goes after other men and the gifts they give her. In the course of time, all those things are stripped away from her, in order to lead her back to her husband. The Lord calls her out to the wilderness, to be loved and restored. This is what solitude is for, to strip away all the things that claim our attention and longing. So bring your dissatisfaction with you in solitude, tell it all to Jesus. He'll help you sort out what are the good desires and what has gone astray. But if you hold it back, it'll never be put right.

I'm still very much in the early stages of learning how to come to God with all of this. If I'm honest, my times of solitude are mostly my mind wandering or staring blankly or me complaining. But there have also been times where I've known God's presence. Where the space feels full and my inner toddler finds quiet and rest. It's only from the solid ground of being with God that all the other pursuits fall into place. I love how the song *In Christ Alone* captures this: "what heights of love, what depths of peace, when fears are stilled, when strivings cease. My comforter, my all in all, here in the love of Christ I stand." The only way

past The Wall is to push through it into the arms of God. He's on the other side calling you on. Sometimes the way he calls is through that lack of satisfaction.

I want to leave you with an invitation. An invitation to come, be with Immanuel, the God who is with us. From start to finish, being with God has always been the goal. In the garden of Eden God walked with us in the cool of the evening, and at the end of Revelation, we see a city where God is present with his people. God satisfies us with his love, he rejoices over us with singing, he invites us to come. All who are thirsty, come to the waters, without needing any money to buy your way in. Come to the table and feast on the Bread of Life, Jesus himself who gave his body and blood to make a way for us to be near. Come to the Living water, the Spirit welling up inside of us to eternal life. Come and abide in the True Vine, for we can do nothing apart from him; this is full, eternal life, that we are brought into the very life of God.

Prayer – Jesus, before your death and resurrection, you prayed for all who would believe in you. Your deep desire is that we might be one, as you and the Father are one. Holy Spirit, bring us into the love and joy at the heart of who you are. May the love of the Father for the Son be in us, as you are in us. Give us the courage to come to you with all our dissatisfaction and all our longings. May we find immeasurably more than all that we've ever hoped or imagined in you. Amen.

Invitation to follow Jesus: A reminder that there is cake and coffee and conversation just around the corner. Stick around a while! This morning, if you want to know more about how to get through The Wall or how to seek God in solitude, please, come talk to me. There are so many great resources available on how to get started and go deeper. Pastor Rob and I will be out in the lobby for conversation and prayer for anything you have going on. You are not alone – Jesus is ready and waiting to meet you, and we are here for company on the journey.

Benediction:

¹⁶ I pray that out of [the Father's] glorious riches^g he may strengthen you with power^f through his Spirit in your inner being,^g ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts^h through faith. And I pray that you, being rootedⁱ and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people,^j to grasp how wide and long and high and deep^k is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge^l—that you may be filled^m to the measure of all the fullness of God.ⁿ