

**July 5, 2020**

**Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8**

**Prayer:** Dear God, I pray a special prayer today for all those in the midst of recovery with no meetings, of unemployment with few hiring, of lack of community with no way to find it. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

### **Of Butterflies and Ripples**

Does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?

That was the question posed by scientist Edward Norton Lorenz as he studied weather in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In less poetic language, do tiny changes in one system have cataclysmic repercussions in another?

*Does a dust storm in the Sahara affect a sunset in Greenville?*

*Does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?*

The so-called Butterfly Effect is a tenet of Chaos Theory. It describes how the tiniest breath of a butterfly flapping its wings can affect giant, complex systems on down the line.

In fact, Lorenz concluded that it's impossible to predict weather in the long term precisely because we can't factor out all the tiny changes that affect it.

A 2004 movie, *The Butterfly Effect*, adopted this premise. Ashton Kutcher usually annoys the heck out of me. But I liked him in this thriller.

The premise of the movie was that Kutcher's character had blackouts as a boy. As a young adult, he began regaining the memories from what he had actually experienced during the blackouts.

As he explores his spotty history, he travels back and forth among different life paths, with the outcomes changing drastically according to changes in his childhood.

Every *little* change results in a major change somewhere down the line. No sooner does he correct one thing than an unintended consequence crops up elsewhere.

Every little flap of a butterfly's wings results in a tornado.

It is an intriguing movie. While it veers off into science fiction and conjecture and time travel, the basic premise of small actions affecting later situations is solid.

Vince swears that as I lay in the hospital after delivering our daughter Dustin, I said, "We are not doing this again."

What a different life we would have had as a family of three rather than five.

I call it the ripple effect. You throw a rock in a lake, and the plunk creates waves that ripple through time and space. Long after the rock has sunk to the bottom, some fish is still bouncing around in the ripples.

Back in 2011, a man named David brought a group from Michelin for a Back Yard Mission Day at Triune. Those Mission Days were opportunities for visitors to see our work and to learn about homelessness in Greenville. Ten days after the visit, David had a massive heart attack and died.

We didn't know anything about it until memorial checks started coming in the mail – two, then five, then 15 or more. Many of them were group gifts from 10 or more co-workers.

I had to call Michelin and ask, “What in the world happened?” Clearly, his wife had listed Triune as a beneficiary for memorials. But almost every donation had a note attached, saying, “David talked so much about your ministry. I know he'd want you to have this.”

Cecile Michon is the volunteer who writes our thank you letters. After several weeks of writing thank yous to David's friends, she said, “Sometimes we underestimate the power we have to touch people.”

*Sometimes we underestimate the power we have to touch people.*

How often do you hear of a counselor or coach or teacher who made the difference in a child's life?

A counselor who saw something in a withdrawn or lonely child and encouraged her to believe in herself?

A coach who saw that a student couldn't afford a coat or lunch or a field trip and quietly provided it?

A teacher who saw something in a hyperactive or loud child and encouraged him to pursue his creativity?

As I have mentioned before, our son, Taylor's first-grade teacher told him he was the class clown. He thought she was assigning him a job.

All year he came home with notes about how she'd had to discipline him. I would say, *What are you doing?* And he would carefully explain to me that he *had* to turn his chair over and make everyone laugh because he was the class clown. He couldn't understand why the teacher was upset when she had hired him herself.

His second-grade teacher left mid-year under mysterious circumstances. I was afraid to ask questions.

But in the third grade, he got his life-changing teacher. She saw something in this wild little boy. She invited him to draw a football picture and entered it in a contest at Furman. He and five classmates had their art printed on that year's football tickets.

More importantly, she invited him to write stories and read them aloud to the entire class. His love of performing was channeled into something more productive than tipping over chairs.

When she died unexpectedly a few years later, he insisted that we attend her funeral. Even as a pre-teen, he recognized how her kindness had impacted his life.

Every one of us has the power to be that teacher or that parent or that friend's parent or simply that friend who can drop a stone into someone's life and step back and watch the ripples. Every one of us

can say something encouraging, something kind, something empathetic.

If there is one thing I have repeated more than any other in this place, it is what a homeless man once said to me. “Pastor,” he said, “do you know the worst thing about being homeless? It’s not being cold or wet hungry. The worst thing about being homeless ... is being looked right through.”

Every one of us has the power to look, to see, to smile, to nod. Every one of us has the power to acknowledge someone’s humanity.

Of course, the opposite is true as well. We can drop a stone of hurt – a beating, a rape, a robbery, a cruel comment – and those ripples can cripple someone for life.

How will we ripple the lives around us? Will we affect someone positively or negatively?

Because we *will* create ripples. The only question is whether they will nudge someone gently toward a safe shore, or they will drown someone in a turbulent wake.

One of the most amazing things in dealing with people in active addiction is their denial of the impact they have on others. “I’m not hurting anybody but myself!” we hear over and over again.

Really? That child you abandoned isn’t hurt? That employer who took a chance on you? That mother who has taken all the guilt on herself, wondering how she failed you so badly?

It is no accident that a willingness to own up to our ripple effect is in all the 12-step recovery programs.

Our Scripture passage today is about the ripples and rhythms of life. It comes from the book of Ecclesiastes, which may be one of the strangest books in the Bible.

Ecclesiastes is a Wisdom book, in the genre of Proverbs, and is narrated by a person whose name can be translated Teacher or Preacher.

Much of the book is rather depressing as the Teacher talks with a world weariness about the predictability of life. “All is vanity.” “There is nothing new under the sun.”

But then in chapter 3 comes a poem with a more positive tone.

It, too, acknowledges that there is a predictability to life. But it’s not a bad thing. In this well-known poem, there are rhythms to life. Seasons to life. A time for everything under the heaven of a benevolent God.

I’m reading from **Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8.**

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

<sup>2</sup> a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

<sup>3</sup> a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

<sup>4</sup> a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

<sup>5</sup> a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

<sup>6</sup> a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

<sup>7</sup> a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

<sup>8</sup> a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

In *this time* of a global pandemic, when so many of our simple pleasures have been taken away, I find it helpful to take this look from 30,000 feet. To look at life as a cycle of seasons.

Yes, we are in a time of breaking down, but there will come a time of building back up.

Yes, we are quite literally in a time to refrain from embracing, but we will return to embracing.

Yes, we are in a time of weeping, but there will be a time to laugh.

I am the first to admit that I am a concrete, linear thinker. I think in terms of problems and solutions, either/or, success and failure, plots that click into place. Brainstorming and cyclical thinking can be uncomfortable for me.

For us linear thinkers, this poem can be quite challenging. But also enlightening.

We can worry all we want about process and progress, achievements and accomplishment. But there will be seasons that roll

right on whether we're on board or not. If this pandemic has shown me anything, it is that I am not in control of anything.

Despite our best efforts, there will be a time when we tear as well as a time when we sew.

Despite all our insurance, there will be a time to mourn as well as a time to dance.

Despite all our striving, there will be a time to lose as well as a time to seek.

What is it that Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer says?

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;  
the courage to change the things I can;  
and the wisdom to know the difference.”

It has taken me a long time to realize that we can't help every person who comes through our doors. There are manipulators and thieves and users and people so enslaved by addiction that we can't get through to them.

Father Gregory Boyle spoke at last spring's United Ministries luncheon. He's the author of *Tattoos on the Heart* and runs a ministry in Los Angeles that helps former gang members rebuild their lives.

And here's what he said, "We are not there for everyone who *needs* help. We are there for everyone who *wants* help."

He is absolutely right. We cannot want help for someone else. They have to want it for themselves.

But sometimes in the midst of just being here, of helping someone else as the resistant person swirls and passes and watches, something may change. Years down the road, he may want help. In another season, she may accept help.

Sometimes a butterfly flaps and flaps and flaps until it creates a cool breeze.

I used to think that divorce meant a failed marriage. Being fired meant a failed career. Coming in second meant failing to win.

But can you really say a 25-year marriage failed if there were 20 good years? If there were beloved children? Now I think, the marriage had its season.

Can you say a career failed because market forces changed in the last half decade? No, it had its season.

Is a silver medalist a failure? No, someone else simply had a better performance on one particular day in one particular event.

I think that's what Ecclesiastes is telling us. There's **“a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away....”**

I officiated at a graveside service last weekend, and I ran into a colleague who pastors another church. I asked him if this pandemic was the worst thing he'd faced in his pastorate.

“Hands down,” he said. “Absolutely no contest.”

I think so many clergy feel that way because COVID-19 has stolen what the church does best – and that is to create a community, a

home, a hospital for people during their seasons of pain. Every recovery meeting, every meal, every art room session, every Playback Café, every Round Table, every Bible study was an effort to look at people, to let them know they were seen as children of God.

Every one of those gatherings was a butterfly's wing flapping, a stone arching toward water.

We saw all the rippling possibilities.

But gatherings are not the only way to create ripples. Every one of us has a circle of people we impact.

It is our choice, our decision, what kind of ripples we will send out. Great crashing waves that swamp someone. Or gentle, embracing ripples that soothe a hurting soul.

Lord, there will be **“a time to keep, and a time to throw away....  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”**

Give us the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.