

**LIFE MATTERS 7: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES
ECCLESIASTES 11:1-6
FEBRUARY 14, 2016**

I have a unique position in the world. As a father who drives a minivan on road trips, I have a unique vantage point on the world. I must pilot our fair vessel from one locale to the next, but especially on road trips. I must face forward and shout backwards. I must make good time and keep every one safe, and of course, I must endure endless hours of children's media from the front seat. Although, children's music is rough, children's movies are brutal.

These movies are brutal for many reasons. But one rises above the rest, watching a kid's movie is one thing, but listening to cartoon voices and nonsensical language while driving 70 mph is quite another. Some movies are worse than others but occasionally some are a joy. One and a half years ago, there was a bright spot because my kids were obsessed with *Mary Poppins*. If you don't believe me, check out this 2014 Halloween picture:

(<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152890851261458&set=pb.633801457.-2207520000.1455165125.&type=3&theater>)

Needless to say, we watched *Mary Poppins* a few times on our road trips. Here is the amazing part, this movie I thought was about a pseudo-witch who blows into town, then causes some trouble only to leave again was quite a bit deeper.

While this movie includes dancing on rooftops, spoonfuls of medicine and the flying of kites, there is something much deeper going on. There is a worldview at stake in this movie. The patriarch of this movie has lost himself in quite the ecclesiastical way. He has become a well-regarded professional who has obtained the British dream. Mr. Banks is a high-ranking bank officer who has wealth and success. His life, his bank and his family are run with precision based on predictability and an advanced understanding of risk and return. He has a well-ordered house, but it will become quite clear quite quickly that the life he leads is quite empty.

At the other end of the spectrum of course is Mary Poppins. Hers is a life of mirth and games. The people and events she invests her time in can be best understood as chalk on a sidewalk and soot in a chimney, all dusty things that blow away quickly. While she is intentional and thoughtful, her life doesn't make dollars and cents from a standpoint of precision and risk/return.

Between these two polarities is an old woman feeding birds. Believe it or not, the old blind woman with one eye who sells birdseed on the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral for tuppence is the fulcrum of the movie. She is the one standing between two worlds, the orderly, precise and planned world of Mr. Banks and the carefree, game-filled world of Mary Poppins. The invitation from the bird lady is to cast some seed, to invest a small amount of money and then seemingly throw it away.

The bird lady is the key figure in this movie. She is not unlike Mr. Banks because she sells her seeds for a price. But she is not unlike Mary Poppins because she encourages you to do something dusty, something that will fade away and get eaten up. She is a little bit of both. She sits in a consumerist world and sells her wares. She sits in a world longing for philanthropy and encourages free gifts. She is a nice bit of both worlds. The real world and the aspirational world. The world you can measure and the world you cannot.

Before there was Walt Disney or P.L. Travers, there was Qoheleth, the man at the end of his life, who found himself between two worlds. Qoheleth was at a point where an orderly world had very little order, where success was dusty and prone to blow away. He understood the lasting power of success and yet how quickly it faded away. The more you read this book, the more you realize he is trying to synthesize or somehow make sense of this world.

The collision of absurd and explainable is best understood as hebel. More than 30 times, Qoheleth has pointed to the hebel nature of life. Hebel, meaning vain, futile, meaningless and brief, is Qoheleth's go-to-word to explain our world. The race isn't always to the swift; hebel. Pleasure is fleeting and transitory; hebel. The wealth you work so diligently to obtain

is passed on to someone else; hebel. Again and again, Qoheleth finds the hebel things in life and he tries to make sense of it all.

Here is the great beauty of Ecclesiastes, the reason I think many of you love this book, he doesn't solve the tension. It is our human inclination to move towards polarities; more conservative or more liberal; more constrained or more free. More law or more grace. You pick the category, our number one inclination is moving towards a closed system. We prefer to be straight-party voters, not strictly in the political sense, but that too. We like a set of beliefs or a system that we can tick each box to convey our worldview. But Qoheleth reminds us life isn't like that. It's often times hebel. Counterintuitive. Life is complicated.

Today is no different. Qoheleth is going to give some wisdom about how you use your life, your resources, time, money and talents. He is going to talk about how you invest your resources, and the answer may surprise you.

He's going to offer some counterintuitive truth in this hebel world we live in, and he delivers this truth with a spoonful of sugar.

Ecclesiastes 11:1-5

This passage spends its time switching between Mary Poppins and Mr. Banks, verses 1-2 are pure Poppins. Do some stuff that is risky and may not pan out the way you had hoped. "Cast your bread upon the waters," sounds a bit like feeding the birds. It is a shipping/investment strategy. He is talking about investing in things far away, exporting your goods. This was no small task some three millennia ago. The sea was a dangerous place and pirates were common. It was not uncommon to lose your entire cargo or have some thieves up to and including your own shipping crew nullify any profits you might have made.

To cast your bread upon the waters was a highly risky investment strategy. One that was not orderly or predictable, but the return could be huge. Likewise, Qoheleth advocates for

diversification. He tells the reader to spread your seed generously, invest in seven things... no make that eight. Invest a lot and often in high risk and high reward situations.

Verse 3 is pure Banks. He talks about the orderly predictable nature of the world we live in. If the clouds look full, rain is soon to come. When a tree falls, that's where it is staying. There is a predictable order to things that can be calculated and followed.

If any of this sounds familiar, it is because there are always Poppins and Banks in this world. Realists and dreamers. Actuaries and artists. Engineers and entrepreneurs. Call them what you want, it's always the same. God has designed all of us with inclinations and leanings. We are often wired to be more one than the other. Qoheleth acknowledges both. The question we ask, of course, is, "Which one is right?"

This is especially pertinent today when we come to the topic of Life for Others. If you want to cause a fight at a dinner party, ask everyone what we should do about poverty. Ask everyone what we should do about crime. Ask everyone what we should do about inequality. The mashed potatoes and strong opinions will quickly be flying across the room.

If you don't believe that, look at the conversations our country is currently having in this election season. Some are big questions, some are small questions, some foreign and some domestic. What do you do with something like the safety of our borders in Texas and Arizona? What do you do with something like the safety of drinking water in Michigan? Are these personal problems or corporate problems? Issues individuals should solve? Issues government should solve? Issues the church should solve? Do I have your attention now?

The problem, of course, is a Poppins/Banks problem. The Poppins of the world, on their best days, are compassionate and generous, but on their weaker days are naïve as to how people really work. They may not realize that when you cast your bread upon the waters, others will eat it and not become any better off. The Banks of the world on their best days are wise and practical, but on their weaker days are oblivious to the systemic problems we

face. That it is not enough to tell people to change their ways but that system-wide change is necessary.

Walt Disney worked for two decades to secure the rights to make P.L. Travers' book into the movie *Mary Poppins*. One of Travers' biggest concerns was the "Disneyfication" of her book. She was afraid if Walt Disney got a hold of her book it would be show tunes, magic and bright colors. Travers had an appetite for a complex world with some darker tones, and dealing with the man who would build the happiest place on earth - well you can see her problem. They were Poppins and Banks before the characters ever took to the big screen. They were the collision of art and commerce, idealist and realist, Poppins and Banks.

One thing brought them together, however. The thing that sold P.L. Travers on Walt Disney and the thing that became Walt Disney's favorite song and moment in the movie was the *Feed The Birds* song. Something about that melancholic and foggy moment drew them together. Just as a reminder, the Banks kids have been with Poppins for a while and her magic is rubbing off on them. They go with their father to visit his work at the bank and they encounter the poor bird woman asking for tuppence, which is two pence or two pennies for non-Brits. Just a tiny bit.

She isn't just feeding the birds by herself, she is including others. She isn't just asking for money, she is selling the crumbs she has collected so that others can feed the birds. She is the perfect mix of practicality and wastefulness. She is offering an experience while also asking for sacrifice. Somehow, P.L. Travers and Walt Disney met there. Somehow, they met in the middle at the bird lady.

Qoheleth has gone back and forth between practicality and idealism. Between risk and reward in a hebel world. Then we come to verses 4 and 5.

Verse 4 is a reminder that you miss all of the shots you don't take. He says if you watch the wind and look at the clouds neither will plant nor reap. The person who tries to completely avoid risk will also completely avoid any returns. This whole passage, but especially this

verse, is a call back to last week. We live in an unpredictable world and if you wait for the perfect moment, you will never find it.

Verse 5 is a reminder of the counterintuitive kingdom we live in. He says sometimes it's Banks and other times it's Poppins. But we cannot understand the work of God. There will be seasons where he tells you to cast your bread upon the water, to be ambitious and risky, to lean forward and leverage what you can. To give away a great amount of your time and money for the sake of others. There will be other times where you are charting the clouds and being thoughtful with your resources. The bottom line is that only God's bottom line matters. He works in ways you cannot fathom or always understand and that is okay.

The secret when it comes to Life for Others is obedience. There will be seasons of Poppins and seasons of Banks. There will be moments of wild giving and moments of thoughtful analysis. Both are okay as long as one is not who you are all the time. Obedience is the key when it comes to life for others. Knowing that one day God may lead you to leave a \$100 tip and another day you might not be prompted to do anything when passing a person with a cardboard sign. The key is obedience. It is the leading in the moment.

The danger that we have explored all along in this series is becoming formulaic or monolithic in your faith. Once you have drawn up a series of tenets for living and patterns for following, you may have a problem. If Jesus can never urge you to do something you have never done, then you may have a problem. The whole of Christian life has wrongly been stripped down to giving mental ascent to the idea of Jesus and then adapting him to your particular worldview.

The call of Jesus is really quite wild. Some people Jesus needs to tame, others need to be let loose. For some there is a season to stand up and for others a time to sit down. You see this among the disciples. Peter needs to be tamed. He is wild and wears his heart on his sleeve. Jesus leads him to be more of a thinker and shapes him into a thoughtful man who shepherds the church and preaches eloquent sermons. On the other end you have Thomas

who needs to be set free, “If you don’t believe, come stick your fingers in my wounds. You have thought about it long enough, come and feel.”

You see this on a macro scale in the church. Paul writes to the church in Galatia and Corinth about grace and about Jesus, but he takes two very different tacts. To the Corinthians, he says you need to be tamed. To the Galatians, you need to be set free. I’m sure you know this but the gospel doesn’t just set us free from sin and death, it sets us free from who we used to be. The rules, the guilt or the irrefutable truths we used to stand upon.

Jesus shakes it up and says, Follow me.” That means you zig and zag when he does. That brings us back to the passage at hand, sometimes things are knowable and predictable. Sometimes they are not. What matters is that God works with what you offer. His economy is different from ours, and when he asks you to do something out of your comfort zone or worldview, you have an opportunity to listen, obey and follow. This leads us to verse 6.

This is the bottom line of Life for Others. You may be more comfortable as a Banks or a Poppins. Just don’t do nothing. If you have been entrusted with time, talents and cash do not sit idle. If you prefer to do a lot of research before you give or volunteer, that is fine, just don’t do nothing. If you like to give money away on street corners and sign up for ministries after hearing about it for the first time, that is fine, just don’t do nothing.

The key for the bird lady is that she shows up every day. She has decided to love God’s creation and to invite others into her work. She shows up every day. She has had a calling placed on her life and she is sticking with it by daily showing up.

The two keys to Life for Others are obedience to what God has called you to and then showing up. Last week, my encouragement for you and my hope for SFC was to be a church that is predictable in an unpredictable world. That people know Christians in their life will show up when things go wrong.

Next week, we have an opportunity to be the people who show up, to be salt and light to a hurting world. Next week is Serve Sunday and this is something we have been doing for three years at SFC. We are building a reputation in the community. Hopefully we are known as a church with great community, great music, and occasionally good preaching. We also should be known as a church that shows up and is out there on a regular basis.

It is starting to happen. About a year ago, we got a service award from the Saratoga City council. They saw our good works and glorified our father who is in heaven. We have jobs for all shapes and sizes. If you have never done Serve Sunday, let this be a time that God stretches you. Maybe you have had good reasons or good excuses why you have never done it before but be willing to be stretched. I think I can echo the words of the bird lady:

Early each day to the steps of Saint Paul's

The little old bird woman comes

In her own special way to the people she calls,

"Come, buy my bags full of crumbs;

Come feed the little birds,

Show them you care

And you'll be glad if you do

The young ones are hungry

The nests are so bare

All it takes is tuppence from you.

You'll be glad if you do. This is not an invitation to alleviate guilt; it is an invitation to joy. Serving and doing life for others is often about guilt, when it should really be about joy, about kindling or rekindling that thing that made you feel most alive.

I'll finish with this, St. Paul's Cathedral was well known among Brits for quite some time but it came world famous after the smashing success of the Mary Poppins movie. The bird feeding made it famous. People went out of their way to see this sight and recreate their

favorite movie scene, but things got messy, so they eventually put up a sign, "Please do not feed the birds." The very thing they became famous for, they were now running from.

Let that not be true of our church. The early church gave it all away because that's what the founder of our faith did. He poured it all out on the cross for you and for me. It was a wild gift. He was generous and humble in his service and it attracted people. The early church did the same. They shared their goods with each other and the wider world. They took care of the sick during plagues. They picked up babies that were thrown away and made them their own, and they became famous for it. Sadly, many churches today have put up "Don't feed the birds" signs. Let that never be true of us. Find your place to serve in this church and please sign up for Serve Sunday. You will be glad if you do.