A Pastoral Reflection on the life of Steve Connell

I didn’t know Steve well, but one of the roles of a pastor is to know people, so you learn to use every opportunity, every conversation, no matter how small, to look for clues. It’s interesting how much you can read what is on the inside by learning to listen carefully to the outside. For the little time we had together, I think I knew Steve. I think he was a restless soul, a wandering spirit, but I believe beneath his unsettled, sometimes crusty outer bearing was a deep, solid core.

One thing we started teaching our sons early is that life is not fair. Everyone doesn’t have the same opportunities, get the same chances… The *boundary lines*, as the Psalmist calls them, do not always *fall in pleasant places* for us. The trajectory of those lines, the patterns and purpose of our lives, are the result of a host of complex factors, some of our own making, but many of them not. We all live with the hand we’re dealt, as it were.

Of course, many people see God’s hand more directly at work, in all the good and in all the bad, but I don’t believe that was Steve’s theology. It is not mine. God is with us. No matter where the lines fall. No matter for what reason. The child of Christmas was called “Emmanuel,” which means, literally, “with us… God.” It really is the Greatest Story ever told.

God was with Steve, every step of his sometimes difficult journey. Anyone who knows the soaring majesty of a *quercus alba*, the delicate beauty of a *mimosa pudica* knows a deep appreciation for the mystery and intricacy of life. Steve knew a white oak and a mimosa when he saw one, and could name every bug in the arthropod phylum (those would be insects for you and me)… And Steve found fascination in the geometries and the colors and the chemical properties of crystals and gems. Even in inorganic matter, Steve could sense life.

The author of 1 Peter calls the church “*living stones*,” and maybe that paradoxical description is appropriate for Steve, who didn’t practice his faith in any traditional manner, but who wrestled with God, walked with God, interacted with God, through the natural world, and as he wrestled and walked and interacted with those around him.

You might call Steve a bit of a cynic – but rather than putting him outside the faith, I believe his uneasy relationship with religion puts him in good company with many, even the heroes of faith. After he wrestled with God all night on the banks of the Jabbok River, the patriarch, Jacob, awoke to a new day and a new name, Israel: one who contends with God and prevails. It is the very heart of faith, contending with God.

And we can hear this contention, and a bit of Steve’s cynicism, in the words of the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. I have come to love this text because in my role as the pastor of this church I have, maybe surprisingly, come in contact with a good many who shared Steve’s cynicism. I find it inspiring that the Bible is wise enough to allow some room for the unconventional wisdom of the unconventionally religious. There are no easy answers for Ecclesiastes, and an uncomfortable amount of skepticism… *Vanity, vanity, all is vanity*, the writer says. Life isn’t fair. Life makes no sense. Yet in it all… the affirmation is sure: God is with us.

So, let me invite you to hear a bit of Steve in these cynical, but good words of faith:

Ecclesiastes 9

*All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know. Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun.*

Wow… that’s hard and harsh. The good and the bad, they all end up the same place: dead! It’s a skeptical view of life, but it’s not without God… So,

*Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.*

With the bugs and the trees… in whatever you find joy, in pursuing that life, God is with you.

*Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them.*

The hymns says, “Time, like an ever-rolling stream, soon bears us all away…” So let’s enjoy the time we have. And the chapter concludes with this story:

*I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed important to me. There was a little city with few people in it. A great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege-works against it. Now there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. So I said, ‘Wisdom is better than might; yet the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded.’*

*The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one bungler destroys much good.*

The preacher of Ecclesiastes says cynical wisdom in a harsh world is better than any of the traditional systems of thought. And God is with us.

I believe God is with us, today, tomorrow, forever… so let me end with these words from Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth.

From 1 Corinthians 15

*But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’ Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body… There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies…*

*So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.*

*What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed… For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.*

Paul offers this hope – it’s a crazy hope for a cynical world. He says these bodies we know, physical, temporal, will perish, but he says a new body awaits. A spiritual body, imperishable, immortal. Hope does not die. You know that Amy and I don’t preach much about heaven, but I hold to Paul’s words with true belief. Life doesn’t end when our breathing ceases. As Kahlil Gibran asks, rhetorically, in his poetry, “What is it to die, but to free the breath of its restless tides that it might rise and expand and seek God, unencumbered.” Death isn’t the end of breathing, but the beginning of a new, eternal inspiration – breathing in, eternally, the presence of God. I believe it.

And I love that Paul ends this word of speculative theology… this talk of bodies, earthly and heavenly, with a very earthly encouragement, which is where we should end:

*Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*

We give thanks for the unconventional life of Steve Connell, and in his shadow let us commit our way forward: *for whatever our hands find to do… will not be done in vain*.

May it be so. Amen.