

Cycles

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Wayne Eberly
September 4, 2016

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the sun.” These are words from one who has watched life, paid attention, has tried to make sense, and has come to see that life has patterns and seasons, a give and take, an ebb and flow, beginnings and endings, and that somehow and somewhere within it all there is a time for everything. Life is indeed a cycle, and coming to terms with, and looking for meaning and purpose in this cycle, is a step toward attaining wisdom in this life. Labor Day traditionally marks the end of summer and the beginning of the school year. In the church we begin a new program year, ministries that have taken a summer break start up again. The days shorten, the weather cools, and here in New England we anticipate the changing of the trees and the bright colors of fall. There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the sun. The careful observance of life, the contemplation of life, the participation in life, the hopes and fears, the celebration and the disappointment, the weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing, killing and healing, has led the author of Ecclesiastes to acquire a measure of wisdom.

On this Sunday of Labor Day weekend, I am taking the observations of the cycle of life found in Ecclesiastes three as a departure point for some of my own observations, learning, and reflection about cycles. Whereas the preacher in Ecclesiastes reflected on the cycle of life in all of its many manifestations, my reflection is on one particular cycle, a literal and physical cycle. My observations, learning, and reflection, are simply on a bicycle. For whatever reason, the bicycle has played a significant role in the shaping of my life, my understanding of life, and my appreciation of life. And this has been from an early age.

A bicycle shaped my self-esteem. Growing up in a small town not too different from Westerly, having a bicycle was a great means of independence for a child. Before I could even ride a bicycle, I benefited from a bicycle. In kindergarten, all the other kids walked to school, were dropped off by their parents, or took the bus. So did I, most days. But once in a while my big brother Danny, who was already in junior high school, would ride his bike up to our school as the kindergarten class was being dismissed. He would wave at me and call me over. I would run to him, and then he would lift me up and set me on the seat of his bicycle. With all the other kids watching in envy, he would give me a hike home on his bicycle. I might as well have been king of the world for how special I felt, riding home with my big brother.

A bicycle played a central role in one of the great father/son dramas of all time. My dad was real good about giving me independence. He helped me get a bike, taught me to ride the bike, let me pedal around town to sports practices, to our public swimming pool, to my friend's houses not only on our street but even across town. But there was one place my dad didn't want me to go. It was a store called Old Towne News and Such. It was a really cool store that had all the latest magazines, candy, soda, and many novelty items. It was right next to the county courthouse which was on a big plaza and just across the street was our famous ice cream parlor and library. Old Towne News and Such was perfectly situated to be a popular hangout. But Old Towne News and Such had something my dad was adamantly opposed to, and that was pinball machines. For the life of him he couldn't figure out why I wanted to plug my hard earned quarters into those stupid machines. It was a waste of money, and my dad had grown up poor, and being wise with your money was pretty important to him. Me, on the other hand, I couldn't get enough of the bumpers and flippers and lights and targets, and so we went back and forth about whether I could go and play pinball at Old Towne News and Such.

One day I was at Old Towne playing pinball. There is the slight chance I didn't get permission to go. Maybe I snuck there without telling my dad. But I wasn't smart enough to hide my bicycle. I parked my bicycle out front of the store and went in to play pinball. My brother Barry was with me. While it was my turn at the pinball game he went out to the front of the store to get a snack. He came back with this shocked look and said, "Wayne, you're in big trouble. Come outside and look." I rushed out with him, and when we got outside the store I stared at my bike. It was crushed in half. A woman, driving a big old Lincoln Continental had backed into a parking spot and that huge bumper on her car had smashed my bicycle. There was no rescuing that bike. And there was no redeeming that situation. My dad warned me about playing pinball, and now my punishment was clear. My bike had been destroyed.

I was near tears, not only because of what happened to my bike, but also because I knew I had to go home and tell my dad the bad news and who knew what his response would be, when the lady with the big old Lincoln Continental came in. I thought I was now in trouble with her for parking my bike in her spot. Instead, she apologized to me. Then she said the reason she drove a big old Lincoln Continental was because her husband owned the Ford/Lincoln Mercury dealership in town, and that if I went and talked to her husband he would buy me a new bike, any kind of bike I wanted. That night at dinner I told my dad this whole story, and when it was all done and I got to the part about getting a brand new bike, I think I must have gloated a bit and said something like, "See dad, I told you playing pinball wasn't so bad."

If it all ended there I would have been fine. But just about a month later, as I was still the talk of the town with my shiny new bike, I rode it straight through town, past the county courthouse and the library and our famous ice cream store, and sure enough, I parked it in front of Old Towne News and Such. I kind of thought of that parking spot as my own now. I parked my bicycle, went inside, got change for a dollar, and started plugging my quarters into the pinball machine. When I finished up and got ready to leave, I went out front and...to my horror, my bicycle was gone. I didn't lock it up, and somebody had stolen it. You never saw a more disappointed kid than me as I walked that long three miles home, hanging my head and cursing my fate. That night at dinner, and not for the first time, and definitely not for the last, I looked at my dad and said, "I guess you were right." To his credit he didn't rub it in. He gave me a hug, took me out to his shop, and from a bunch of spare parts he built me another bicycle. Oh, yes, I have learned a lot about life from a bicycle.

On a Saturday many years ago I went for a bicycle ride with Julie. We had found a trail that was about twenty miles long, and we set off at a good pace. She immediately raced out to the front, and for the next nineteen and a half miles I tried my darnedest to keep up with her. Finally, after that long ride and that long time being behind, I noticed she was slowing down. She got worn out. Now was my opportunity to prove how manly I was, to demonstrate my powers of endurance. So as she slowed down I passed her up and gave her a smile that said, "Let me show you who is the fastest rider in this family." Turning back to the trail in front of me, I caught sight of something in the trail I hadn't noticed as I was riding behind Julie. Spread across the trail was a chain link fence, and I was barreling right into it. Julie, having seen the fence, had done the wise thing and slowed down. I, on the other hand, had done the foolish thing and passed her going full speed. I hit my brakes as hard as I could, but in my panic I pulled too hard on the front brake, and so my front tire stopped right as I came to the chain link fence and my back tire flew into the air. I skidded on my hands and came to a stop at the fence. My feet were clipped to my pedals, and so there I sat, in the most awkward position I could imagine, my feet and back tire in the air, my front tire and my bloodied hands on the ground, and for the life of me I couldn't get out of this position. I was stuck. Fortunately, I was not alone. Julie rushed to my aid...She immediately hopped off her bike...Instantaneously, in a flash, she came to my rescue...actually, after about fifteen minutes of laughing her head off...she rushed to my aid and helped me down. This too taught me a lesson about life. In Ecclesiastes 4:9 we read, "Two are better than one...if either one falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up." On that day, and so many more, my wife and my friend has been there to help me up. And isn't that what we want the church to be, a place where we have friends to share life with, to be there for one another when someone falls, to help each other up. I'm telling you, that bicycle, you can learn a lot of lessons.

If you have a chance to read the whole book of Ecclesiastes, you might be surprised to find a certain word that occurs many times. That word is meaningless. Along with moments such as we find in Ecclesiastes 3 that seem to find order and purpose in life, in the seasons and cycles, the preacher in Ecclesiastes also saw much that made him despair and feel like life was meaningless. And I guess that makes sense. If life is only a cycle, only a movement from season to season, from life to death, it can easily become a circle and we are just going round and round. What I like about the bicycle is that it not only has wheels that go round, those wheels also move you forward. You can progress. You can move from one point to another. And when we look at the bible, at the story of God's involvement with human beings, it is not a circle that just spins round and round. Life with God is a journey, and although the journey can be difficult, and there will be losses and sadness and sorrow, the journey moves forward. It moves forward because God has a plan and a purpose. A kid in youth group years ago found a story he liked and he shared it with the group. It is a story about faith. It is a story about being on a journey with God. And it is a story about a bicycle.

The Road of Life

At first, I saw God as my observer, my judge, keeping track of the things I did wrong, so as to know whether I merited heaven or hell when I die. He was out there sort of like a president. I recognized His picture when I saw it, but I didn't really know Him. Later on when I met Christ, it seemed as though life was rather like a bike ride, but it was a tandem bike, and I noticed that Christ was in the back helping me pedal. I don't know just when it was that He suggested that we change places, but life has not been the same since.

When I had control, I knew the way. It was rather boring, but predictable . . . It was the shortest distance between two points. When He took the lead, He knew delightful long cuts, up mountains, and through rocky places at breakneck speeds, it was all I could do to hang on! Even though it looked like madness, He said "Pedal!"

I worried and was anxious and asked, "Where are you taking me?" He laughed and didn't answer, and I started to learn to trust. I forgot my boring life and entered into the adventure. And when I'd say, "I'm scared," He'd lean back and touch my hand.

He took me to people with gifts that I needed, gifts of healing, acceptance and joy. They gave me gifts to take on my journey, my Lord's and mine. And we were off again. He said, "Give the gifts away; they're extra baggage, too much weight." So I did...to the people we met. I found that in giving I received, and my burden was light.

I did not trust Him, at first, in control of my life. I thought He'd wreck it; but He knows bike secrets. He knows how to make it bend to take sharp corners, how to jump to clear high rocks, how to fly to shorten scary passages. So I am learning to keep quiet, trust him, and pedal. We go to the strangest places, and I'm beginning to enjoy the view and the cool breeze on my face, and especially my constant companion, Jesus Christ. When I'm sure I just can't do any more, he just smiles and says, "Pedal."

No, we are not just going round and round in a meaningless circle. There are cycles and seasons in life, but we are on a journey. Like the story a kid in our youth group loved so much, we are riding a tandem bike, and Jesus is in front, he is guiding the way, and he will always lead us on this journey of life.

I guess what stirred my thinking about bicycles is that all throughout my life I keep learning lessons that are related to bicycles. This summer I got a message from Luba that a couple was in town and they were having their tenth anniversary. They were Presbyterians and so they called the only Presbyterian Church in town to see if the pastor would help them renew their wedding vows on their tenth anniversary. This was on a Tuesday and they wanted to do it Wednesday. Even though it was short notice, I thought it would be nice to help them celebrate their anniversary. Plus, they were staying at the Ocean House, and wanted to renew their vows there. I admit, that added to the fun of it. I called the wife and we arranged the details. At that point I also found it this was the wife's idea, and the husband was going to be surprised.

That Wednesday I arrived at the Ocean House and went in to the lobby. Even though I had on a suit, I knew I didn't really belong at the Ocean House. I was looking for the concierge to explain why I was there, when the wife walked in with the husband and their two beautiful young children. We had planned on meeting down on the beach, so we all were a little surprised, particularly the husband, who knew nothing about this at all. I quickly said hello to the wife, and when she introduced me to her husband she said, "Wayne is a pastor at the Presbyterian Church in town." Well, this explained nothing to him, and he just looked at me with confusion in his eyes.

By the time we got down to the beach, the husband had figured things out. And now, instead of confusion in his eyes, there were tears. As we talked together, it became clear these two people, this man and this woman, were deeply in love with God, and they were certain God had brought their two lives together, that God had blessed them with their children, and that without God in their lives they would have no meaning or purpose. Their hearts were filled with gratitude. They renewed their vows, we said a prayer, and then as the kids played in the surf, they shared a

bit about their faith in God. At some point the husband said he grew up in a home where neither of his parents believed in God. But he felt some sort of call to learn about God. What does a kid do when they grow up in a home where neither of his parents believe in God? How is a kid ever going to learn about God? But this little boy felt a call to learn about God. So guess what he did?

He said when he was ten years old he got up one Sunday morning, got on his bicycle, and started riding around, looking for a church. And the first church he found was a Presbyterian Church. So he went in, the people welcomed this little ten year boy with his bicycle, and they told him all about Jesus Christ. The husband said he was looking for Christ and he found him. I thought he meant he found Christ. What he meant was Christ found him. And his life has never been the same. So it was that once again that old bicycle was there to remind me that life is a journey of faith, and for one ten year old kid, it all began by simply riding his bicycle to a church and saying, "Tell me about Jesus."

Here we are, on Labor Day Weekend, the seasons of life changing yet again, from summer to fall, from hot to cool, from long days to short. One season melts into the next in the cycle of life. As things have been so they remain. God is good to give us patterns and rhythms and seasons and cycles. They help us make sense of life. But don't ever believe it is just an endless circle. God is moving things forward.

This fall can be just another season in another cycle that feels like nothing more than a circle. Or this fall can be another step on our journey of faith. We can explore how God is moving us forward, how God is leading us, how God is shaping us. We can move forward on our journey of faith as individuals. We can move forward on our journey of faith as a congregation. God has a plan and a purpose. Life is not simply a cycle, and definitely not a circle. There is an end and a purpose and God has a plan. There is a tandem bike. Don't try to claim the front seat. Jesus has that covered. But let's hop on the back seat. Let's go for a ride, and see where Jesus leads. Let's go for a ride and see where God takes us. Let's go for a ride with the one who created us, who loves us, and who has redeemed us. Let's ride with Jesus. Hold on tight friends. We're in for a big adventure.