

REFLECTION:

I've known for quite some time now that I was going to speak on these verses from Ecclesiastes on this specific day. When I say "quite some time", I mean like since May "quite some time". I've been thinking about today for the past 5 months, and what I've wanted to say has changed drastically over the different seasons. For the longest time, I thought I was going to triumphantly read these verses from Ecclesiastes and then joyfully exclaim, "See, look how beautiful God has made me--this is what 4 years in college does to ya!" That is not the message today. I was always so fixated on the "being beautiful", but I realize it's much more about "getting to the beautiful".

For me, "getting to the beautiful" started with wrestling with my faith. I often feel like the feisty and assertive Canaanite woman who challenges Jesus in Matthew 15--I'm not afraid to challenge what I know and fight for what I deserve. While reading recently, I came across a quote in *Paradise Lost*, where the character of Satan emphatically exclaims, "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven". For a good minute, I sat and thought, "hm, Satan makes a good point there: the power of human agency is a wonderful thing". I then paused and caught my line of thinking. If you take nothing else away from me today, take this: Satan never makes a good point.

I realize that much of my life has been "making a heaven of hell". For those looking in from the outside, the "hell" of my life has been much more apparent, but for me, the one living it, it seems much easier to please society by "putting on a brave face" and "triumphantly rising from the ashes" rather than have someone witness you cry over your deceased mother or lament over your broken familial relationships. I've often poured out my grief into my music, making beauty from my woundedness. Music has been the way I've "cleanly" expressed my grief--with a beautiful melody, and without all of the excruciating details of my life.

My really wise choir director always tells me that I have to go *through* my grief, *through* my tough moments. It was upon hearing this advice (among the advice of a few others) that I took a really difficult step: being honest with the world about my sense of being. That's really difficult to do though, because our minds *really* like to make things ok, even when they're not. It's a lot easier to make a heaven out of hell than to straight up admit we're in hell. For a long time, Satan told me that if I acknowledged reality, if I vocalized that I was in hell, I wasn't being grateful for all of the blessings in my life, I would be inconveniencing people with my troubles, nobody would care about me enough to help me, and that people would look at me as less of a human being because of my shortcomings, and that worst of all, God would no longer love me as his beloved child.

Once I started to recognize how Satan was working in my life, I saw a radical shift in my perception of God's abundant love and grace. Rediscovering God's love pulled me back into reality--a reality where God walks with me through every moment in my life. And that's just it: a reality with God's love isn't all sunshine and rainbows--it's every moment. As we just read in Ecclesiastes, reality is full of moments of laughing and weeping, dancing and mourning, peace, and war. God's love doesn't promise us a reality without suffering, but it does promise to abide with us through it all. And while God's love doesn't promise us a reality of perfection on this side of eternity, he will wipe every tear from our eyes one day.

I've come to realize, here at the Chapel of the Resurrection, the overwhelming love of God. I see God's love in every congregation that gathers for worship here. I see God's love in some of the best friends I've ever made. I see God's love in the people who continue to love and support me day in and day out. God's love is in the music I'm able to make praising Him, even when my world is falling apart. The best visual representation of God's love I can think of, the symbol of God "making everything beautiful in its time" is standing tall right behind me--that the Resurrected Christ behind me isn't just a symbol of God's triumph over the grave, but a symbol of every single one of us being brought to perfection. No matter how hard I try, there's nothing I can do to earn that love, and on the flip side, as long as I believe in Him and love him, there's

nothing I can do that would make him abandon me. It's through God's abundant love and grace alone, however, that I know that one day he will set all things right. I'm about to enter a lot of new seasons of my life as a soon-to-be-graduating senior. I'm ready to commit myself to the faith I know I've had inside of me for a long time and tackle the world as it comes. I now realize that "getting to the beautiful" is going to entail some not so beautiful moments. Looking back, I realize the moment I decided to be honest with the world, accept reality, and flood my heart with God's love was the moment I began completely changing, and saving my life. I'm ready for the good, the bad, and the really ugly, because I know that God's love will pull me through it all and make "everything beautiful in its time".