

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen

A lawyer my father's age told me years ago of the case he tried that helped persuade him he really needed to make a living doing something else. He was in federal court in Norfolk, representing one railroad in a suit against another railroad, the Norfolk Southern against the Southern as I recall. The only issue was which of the two railroads would pay for a railway overpass. He told me that throughout the trial he was unable to get away from the question, "Who cares? What difference does it make?" The preacher or teacher Qoheleth, the otherwise anonymous author of Ecclesiastes, would understand perfectly. He was not only tired of what he was doing, he was pretty disillusioned about life itself.

Vanity of vanities, everything is vanity-transient, worthless, useless, empty. There is nothing new under the sun, and none of it amounts to anything. I hate my job, and I'm not happy about having to leave the fruits of all my hard work to the next generation. Who knows if they will be wise or foolish? All is vanity. This fellow, who wrote this perhaps 2400 years ago, might well have benefited from psychotherapy and medication, because he sure was depressed. Not to spoil the ending for you in this twelve chapter book, but the author does come around, much as Job does, and we see its truly religious nature, as he strikes a blow for divine sovereignty and independence: God is simply not to be

limited and coerced by human considerations, as a teacher of mine wrote. But early on, in the portion we heard, the author is really concerned, convinced even, that all of life amounts to nothing, so why bother? Put in more contemporary terms, no one ever sees a Brink's truck following a hearse. I did hear a man say once though that while he knew he could not take it all with him at death, he was confident his wife would bring it with her.

Well, is the winner really the guy who dies with the most toys, the youngest wife, the most natural looking hair piece, the fastest sports car, the best cosmetic plastic surgeon, the biggest beach house, and so on? One would hope not, yet we all know and read about folks who apparently live by that creed, and the author of Ecclesiastes knew them as well.

Let's move on now 400 odd years to the Gospel from Luke, Jesus' parable of the wealthy fool, a story told only by Luke. You know many of the stories of Jesus appear in three of the gospels and some in all four. Somebody in the crowd, there's always one, asked Jesus to tell his brother to divide the family inheritance with him. That tells us right off the bat that the fellow was part of a somewhat dysfunctional family, but then most families are if you dig deep enough. In those times 2000 years ago the family inheritance went to the oldest son, and the others were pretty much left to fend for themselves, to say nothing of their sisters. Even in England in the 19th century, the norm in upper crust

circles was that the oldest son got the land, the money, and the seat in the House of Lords. The second son went into the Royal Navy, the third son into the Army, and the fourth son into the Church. An interesting priority.

Notice Jesus' response to this younger brother. I'm not here to arbitrate your property disputes, i.e. God the Father sent me with something of an agenda to be sure, but that wasn't on it. Besides, greed is infectious and insidious, my friend, and the accumulation of material possessions, things, stuff, is affirmatively not what it is all about. Now the young man already knew that of course, just as we all know it, but there are lots of things we know that we need to be reminded of from time to time. There is considerable repetition in the lectionary and the liturgy, here and elsewhere, but remember that it is our story, our history as a faith community, and it bears repeating. Can we hear too often that the Lord our God is one God, or that we should love our neighbor as ourself, or that a wandering Aramean was my father, he went down into Egypt and became a great nation, or that in those days a decree went out from Cesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled, or that he is not here, he is risen?

Jesus then went into his parable mode, his favorite teaching method. Tell them a story, let it sink in, and then watch them come to realize the story is about them. It is a time tested method, not unique to Jesus. As was discussed here not too long ago, Nathan the prophet pulled it off beautifully with David when the

royal affair with Bathsheba had come to light.

This time Jesus told of a wealthy farmer, one of those who gets an enormous subsidy courtesy of the lobbyists he sends to the Roman court. His sugar beets, corn, tobacco and soybeans did so well this year that he had run out of storage room. Not to worry though, I'll do what folks are doing now in upscale neighborhoods around the country. I'll bulldoze my perfectly good barns and build McMansion barns, mega barns, to hold all my crops and all my goods. Then I'll be set for life, and I will say to my soul:

Soul, you have amply goods
laid up for many years.
Relax, eat, drink, be merry!

Who could ask for anything more, right? Not quite, but painful as it is to admit, the fellow in this parable is not unique. He, and we, hear now the thundering voice of God: You idiot! You may die tonight. Who get's all this stuff then? Huh? Huh? Did you ever think of that? God is not always subtle. And Jesus summed it up in the parable: So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not generous toward God, or their neighbors, or the poor, or those in prison, and on and on. A little later on in the 12th chapter of Luke come the words we are more familiar with as Matthew recorded them, often read at the offertory:

Lay up not for yourselves
treasures upon earth, where
moth and rust doth corrupt
and where thieves break through
and steal, but lay up for
yourselves treasures in heaven, where
neither moth nor rust doth
corrupt, and where thieves do
not break through or steal, for
where your treasure is, there
will your heart be also.

Put another way, sometimes our check stubs reveal our priorities. It just occurred to me that maybe I should have saved this sermon for stewardship season in the fall, when we are gearing up for the playoffs and the World Series. Several years ago Michael White, our rector then, asked me if I might work something about stewardship into a sermon, and of course as Anne well knows, when my rector asks something of me, I always respond in good Navy fashion: Aye, aye sir, or ma'am, as the case may be. All I remember of that sermon was that I floated the idea, tantalizing to our treasurer Paul Stirrup, that we figure out a way to take up a collection at weddings and funerals.

The wealthy fool in Jesus' parable in Luke and the author of Ecclesiastes 400 years before both got it wrong, on opposite sides of the same coin. Both focused on work and the accumulation of property, as though those things were the answer, the ultimate insurance, the reason of our being, that which we were put on this earth for. No one, surely, was ever heard to say on his deathbed,

“Gosh I wish I had spent more time at the office,” though I am sure there are many who say “I wish I had done more with my life, my priorities.” We are all fortunate that it is never too late to turn our lives, our priorities around, for that is what it means to repent. The God we worship and serve not only allows second chances, but 17th and 27th chances.

We also heard from Paul earlier, in his letter to the Colossians, to the Church at Colossae in Asia Minor. Now Paul’s letters are not always comforting. Seldom did he write just to say “Hey, you folks are doing a great job,” and he could be awfully crusty. He is rather pastoral in his approach to the Colossians though, and what he had to say might have helped the wealthy fool in Jesus’ parable. Paul draws a helpful parallel between life before and after his listeners’ exposure to Christ, a portion of the letter New Testament scholars believe may be an early baptismal instruction. Paul reminds the Colossians of the pointless self-centered ways they used to follow, accompanied by such self-defeating characteristics as anger, wrath, malice, slander, lying, and abusive language. He notes though that there is good news, that they are renewed, a new creation in the image of the creator God. And then comes the well known line:

In that renewal there is
no longer Greek and Jew,
circumcised or uncircumcised...
slave and free, but Christ
is all and in all.

The great social barriers of race, culture, and state of life are broken down. Paul expands on this unifying theme in his letter to the Ephesians:

But now in Christ Jesus you who
once were far off have been brought
near in the blood of Christ.
For he is our peace, who has made
us both one, and has broken down
the dividing wall of hostility...and
might reconcile us to God in one body
through the cross, thereby bringing hostility
to an end.

Paul is the deepest thinker in Scripture, requiring the most of readers/listeners. Remember though that were it not for Paul's ministry, we likely would not be gathered in this place this morning, for it was Paul who, obedient to a dream/vision, crossed the Bosphorus and first took the Gospel to Europe. And it is the Christ he preached and taught who is the answer to the depression seen in the author of Ecclesiastes and the neurotic need to acquire possessions seen in the wealthy fool of the Gospel from Luke. And it is Christ who breaks down all those barrier walls for all time. I say breaks rather than broke too, the present rather than the past tense, for as we know but nonetheless may need to be reminded of, we are not gathered here for a memorial service for the late Jesus of Nazareth, but rather to worship a living triune God and to strengthen ourselves, body, mind, and soul, to go out from this holy place where the real work awaits us, whether in Belize, in prison, in our own homes or

elsewhere, to be Christ to others, even as we see Christ in others.

Amen.

St. Luke's

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