

A sermon offered by Ruth Hopkins
July 31- August 1, 2010 • The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me -- and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity! For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. And people say the Bible is not relevant!

Yes, the writer of this passage is naming some hard truths of life. We work so hard, to have it amount to nothing. We toil and stew, but it is nothing but dust. We are nothing but dust. And whatever you leave behind when you die, you have no control over.

Well, most of the time. There is the story of a Robert Brett, a California man who wasn't allowed to smoke at home. He left his entire fortune to his wife, provided that she smoke four cigars a day for the rest of her life. So I guess he did have a bit of control from the other side.

For most of us though, these are hard truths we don't really care for. We like to think that we are working for some nobler purpose, that saving money for a secure retirement is the right thing to do, that having some nuts squirreled away for a hard winter is reasonable.

The book of Ecclesiastes is considered a wisdom book, and King Solomon is usually thought of as its author. It is my favorite book in the Bible. I love it. To me it is a breath of fresh air, some good plain common sense about life. I did my major Old Testament paper on a portion of it, so forgive me if this sermon is heavy on the book learning.

Ecclesiastes is read during the Jewish feast of *Sukkot*. This festival falls right after Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in the Jewish calendar. It is often called the Festival of the Booths. It is the Jewish equivalent of Thanksgiving, even using the cornucopia as a symbol.¹ Outside shelters, or booths are constructed, and a meal is eaten in it to remind them of their many years without a home. For modern Jews this festival serves as a reminder of their reliance on God in a changing world. The outside booth, or *sukkah*, is open to the weather, and is temporary, it provides no real shelter. As one of my textbooks puts it, "One must look up *through the rook of the sukkah, through the leafy covering overhead to heaven, when seeking true shelter.*"²

We must look to heaven when seeking true shelter. This is the gospel lesson in a nutshell, the theme of both Ecclesiastes and our parable today.

At first glance, there is something a bit off about the idea of looking to heaven for true shelter when you know there are homeless sleeping in extreme heat. When some people need more than pithy spiritual slogans, they need the basics of life, food, water, and shelter. These things are important, Jesus! Is this our response to the needy – don't worry about these things, be rich in God?

Oddly, this parable does not even mention the poor. Why didn't this rich fool give some of his excess to the needy instead of build bigger barns? Some of the resources I consulted this week dwelled on the rich fool's greed. How insensitive the man was to the

¹ George Robinson. *Essential Judaism*. (New York: Atria, 2001), 101.

² Robinson, 105.

poor, and how greedy we still are.

Many of us remember the now classic line from the movie *Wall Street*, "Greed is good." What I did not know until this week is that the director, Oliver Stone, did not intend for that to be the actual motto of the 80's and 90's. He thought it was such an outrageous statement that he assumed his audience would see it for the appalling idea it was.

But it did become the motto of much of business and it still is. The sequel to the movie *Wall Street* is in the works, and it will be interesting to see how greed is handled, in our brave new world of derivatives and so-called financial reform.

Greed is not good. Greed short-circuits your soul. Jesus is crystal clear about that. Greed makes you do things, and think things that leave God behind.

Fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?

Not too get too Biblical scholar here, but most translations of this verse do not really do it justice. A more literal translation might be, *In this very night they demand your soul from you.* Who are the "they" demanding the man's soul? His possessions. Tonight, your possessions demand your very soul. They own you, you do not own them. Do your things own you?

Bob and I often talk about downsizing. We will sell our house, move to a smaller one; get rid of our extra things. When we start to identify what exactly those things are that we will part with – its gets a bit complicated. Not my books, never my CDs and old vinyl records. Not Bob's drums or electronics. We identify a few items in the basement in boxes, but it does not make a dent in our overall picture.

Often we work very hard to get a bigger house to fill it with more stuff, which requires more time, money, and maintenance, more of the energy of our lives is required to keep our stuff. Having enough becomes subjective – is one house enough – or is enough a winter house and a summer house? Is enough having one TV? Or is enough having 3 digital TVs in HD?

We get sucked in by the media images that tell us that our lives could be complete if we could just get the Temperpedic mattress, or just drive the cool car. We hold imaginary numbers in our head, our retirement savings, thinking that once we get that number – we can relax and enjoy life. All too often, it doesn't seem like enough. For

the rich fool, it would never be enough.

Jesus says chasing after more material things only leads to emptiness. Being greedy for stuff costs us – in life energy, and time away from the real source of life – God.

The rich fool in our parable asks the hard question, “What shall I do with my excess? How shall I spend my extra portion?”

As Christians, we are often called to ask the hard questions. How much is enough? More importantly, how do we become rich toward God? Greedy for the right kinds of things?

Barbara Brown Taylor weighs in and suggests we find a larger purpose to life. She says it so well, I won't bother to paraphrase, but quote her directly.

Jesus never says what it means to be “rich towards God.” My guess is that every person here has a different purpose, a different way of being rich toward God. Some people really do need to quit their soul-deadening jobs and find work that is richer in purpose. But a whole lot of other people could wake up to the purpose that is available to them in their lives right now. One of the saddest things in the world is to talk with someone who believes that what he or she does is small change in God's pocket, not even worth counting. As far as I can tell, there is no such thing.

The world is in terrific need of mending, and no stitch is too small. The important thing is to sense your life and God's life are flowing in the same direction – and if you are clear that they are not, then to do something about it.

Get yourself a purpose as soon as you can – one that helps God mend the world, and mends you while you are at it – maybe even one that costs you more than a new laptop or Lincoln Town car, but which promises to do you a whole lot more good...

Until then, if you have to be greedy, then be greedy for love. Be greedy for justice, and wisdom, and significance. That way, when it comes time to show God what is in your treasure chest, there won't be any doubt in either of your minds that you are rich, rich, rich.

Amen, Barbara, Amen.