

OSLC Sermon 08 04 19

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23; Colossians 3:1-11;

Luke 12:13-21

“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.”

(Light cigar)

“That’s life” (Sing)

*That’s life (that’s life), that’s what all the people say*

*You’re ridin’ high in April, shot down in May*

*But I know I’m gonna change that tune*

*When I’m back on top, back on top in June*

*I’ve been a puppet, a pauper, a pirate, a poet, a pawn and a king*

*I’ve been up and down and over and out and I know one thing*

*Each time I find myself flat on my face*

*I pick myself up and get back in the race*

*That’s life...*

We may not think of Frank Sinatra among the great philosophers and wisdom teachers, but that song is a pretty good

contemporary take on what the Teacher describes in the book of Ecclesiastes. Life is beautiful and painful; then you die. It was my seminary Prof, James Limburg, who introduced me and my classmates to Ecclesiastes with cigars and Sinatra. The word translated as “vanity” means something like smoke; mist – referring to that which is ephemeral and doesn’t last. So vanity in this case is less a matter of conceit, but rather “in vain” – without enduring value.

Luke’s gospel and the reading from Colossians point us in a different direction regarding the meaning of life. Both of them counsel us to avoid all kinds of greed. Colossians goes so far as to name greed as idolatry; whatever it is that takes the place of God in our lives.

Comedian George Carlin had a gift for poking fun at the ridiculous things humans take seriously – in a way pointing out our unspoken idolatries. Regarding our attachment to possessions he joked:

You got your stuff with you? I’ll bet you do. Guys have stuff in their pockets; women have stuff in their purses. . . . Stuff is important. You gotta take care of your stuff. You gotta have a place for your stuff. That’s what life is all about, tryin’ to find a place for your stuff! That’s all your house is; a place to keep your stuff. If you didn’t have so much stuff, you wouldn’t need a house. You could just walk around all the time.

A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you’re taking off in an airplane. You look down and see all the little piles of stuff. Everybody’s got his own little pile of stuff.

So now you got a houseful of stuff. And, even though you might like your house, you gotta move. Gotta get a bigger house. Why? Too much stuff! And that means you gotta move all your stuff. Or maybe, put some of your stuff in

storage. Storage! Imagine that. There's a whole industry based on keepin' an eye on other people's stuff.

But humans store up all kinds of stuff. Idolatry comes in many forms. Steve Garnass-Holmes writes about a different kind of storage...

I'm always building bigger barns  
to hold resentments,  
what I'm sure people owe me,  
storehouses of The Way I Want Things To Go,  
reputation and pictures of myself—  
oh, several silos of those pictures—  
and barns, huge barns, of How I Like It,  
my securities and assurances.  
All built of wax.

There are many forms of idolatry that fill the “barns” of our lives: busy-ness/fear of missing out, superiority/privilege, individualism/independence, family, success/achievement...

Well-known preacher Barbara Lundblad says the rich man in the parable has an “I” problem. “I know; I have; I will.” That might also apply to the brother asking for arbitration of inheritance – maybe his issue is about fairness/justice; maybe it's about family resentments; maybe it's even about survival. We can speculate all we want, but the Gospel writer points us toward “all kinds of greed” at the expense of relationship. Consider:

- *The Land* produced an abundant harvest (God)
- Who do you suppose harvested the grain?
- Tore down the old barns?
- Built the bigger barns?

- Is it even possible to “eat, drink, and be merry” all by yourself?

Cynicism, greed, and idolatry are all ways that we strive to avoid and deny what we’re really afraid of: death. All three readings point to the truth that life in this world is fleeting. But death is not the last word. And neither is greed.

Colossians proclaims, “You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” That. Changes. Everything. Or at least it ought to. Therefore/So then, we’re invited to see and think differently about the meaning and value of life itself.

In the book, “Braiding Sweetgrass” writer Robin Wall Kimmerer tells of the tradition of the Onondaga Nation of reciting the *Thanksgiving Address* whenever people gathered. The Address is also known as the “Words That Come Before All Else,” or “Greeting and Thanks to the Natural World.” The children of this indigenous nation are taught to remember every day that, “beginning with where our feet first touch the earth, we send greetings and thanks to all members of the natural world.”

What follows, in long or shorter form is a ritual of acknowledgement and gratitude for each aspect of the ecosystem and its unique function. Such an orientation of notice and appreciation is the antithesis of the rich man’s sense of “my land, my grain, my barns, my soul, my future.” When you give thanks to all the waters of the world for nurturing and sustaining life for all beings, and give thanks to the fish dwelling in the water for fulfilling their function to purify the water and for giving themselves to us as food, it becomes difficult to claim ownership and isolation from the rest of creation.

Our lives are at the same time significant, meaningful, and precious...AND...just a blip, fleeting, and small in the vast interconnectedness of God's abundance. Sinatra and the Teacher are right about the vagaries of human existence with all of its ups and downs. But individuals alone are not the measure and driver of the meaning and purpose of life. Steve Garnaas-Holmes finishes his reflection,

But then:

my life is on fire,  
all of it, house and barns, going up,  
and I have 30 seconds to get out.

What would I grab?

My integrity? My wife? Those pictures?

My sense of humor? My mind?

Yeah, my mind. Or what about my soul?

Of course. My soul.

... Wait...

No,

I'd grab you, God.

Grab you and run.

We have been raised with Christ. This is the heart of Christian faith, and it is not our doing. Our lives are hidden in Christ with God – in whom we live and move and have our being. And so we are free to live with abundance, gratitude, generosity, hope, and deep love – a life that is rich toward God.

*That's Life! Amen.*