

Sermon – 08/04/19

Text – Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-26

Theme – “All is Vanity”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Solomon certainly had it all. He was king of Israel, which at that time was the most powerful and important nation in all the Middle East. He was securely on the throne, with no rivals or threats. His army was numerous and strong. He was one of the wealthiest men in the world, controlling the trade between Egypt and Babylon. He was world-famous, with even the royalty of other nations clamoring to meet him. He was widely known as the wisest man on earth. He had a thousand wives and concubines (although *that* sounds rather intimidating to me!). He was special and precious to God, who even gave him the additional name of Jedidiah (which means “Beloved by God”). What more could Solomon have wanted? You would think that if anyone should have been happy and content, if anyone should have understood the meaning of life, it should have been Solomon.

And yet, in our Old Testament lesson, we hear Solomon utter those famous words of discontent and disillusionment: “Vanity of vanity, all is vanity!” Now, if Solomon, with all that he had and possessed, with all that he knew and understood, if he could throw up his hands in despair and resignation, how are *we* supposed to make sense of it all?

Solomon begins by acknowledging something we all know, but maybe have a hard time admitting: one day we will all die (unless Jesus comes back first) and then what good will all our hard work do us? Solomon goes so far as to say that he actually *hated* all his possessions, all those things for which he had worked and sweated and toiled throughout his life, because one day they would all go to someone who did not earn them.

Of course, if Solomon were honest with himself, he would have to admit that most of the things he had he did not earn but were given him by his father David (and, ultimately, by God): the throne, a prosperous and powerful nation, the riches of his treasury, and so on. Yet Solomon could honestly say that he had taken those things and had increased them. But one day they would no longer be his. And that thought Solomon could not stand.

Who knows, he says, how his successor will handle these things? Would he be a good king, respecting and serving his subjects? Would he maintain Israel’s place in the world? Or would he squander and lose the wealth, the power, the respect accumulated by David – and increased by Solomon? Those thoughts gnawed away at him. When Solomon looked back at his life and all he had accomplished, it all seemed so meaningless because none of it would last – Solomon will die and another will take his place, and eventually all that Solomon had achieved would fall apart. It was all in vain!

Even if a man does his best and works hard, even if he is wise and careful, still the end result will be the same for everyone: death and the loss of all earthly things. With that kind of thinking, it is clear why Solomon writes as he did:

What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.

The dark despair of those words certainly is very different from the kind of sunny optimism and confident hope that one would expect from a person in Solomon’s place. What’s the point of even trying, you might wonder after hearing those words. But we need to understand just what Solomon is talking about here – he is not saying that earthly life and its pleasures, that work and its rewards, have no meaning. Rather, he is saying that they do not

GIVE meaning. That is, all those things of which Solomon wrote have their place and purpose, but none of them can be our gods because they do not last, because they cannot help us in our dying hour, because they all pass away. No, we need to give that place to the only God who *can* help, to the only God who *is* forever, to the only God who *can* deliver us from death.

Jesus makes the very same point in His parable of the rich man in our Gospel lesson. There was nothing wrong with the rich man being rich. There was nothing wrong with him having a bumper crop and taking care to preserve its bounty. There was nothing wrong with him deciding to build new barns in which to store all his grain. No, his sin came in what he did next: “I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years...’” His sin was in trusting his wealth and possessions to take care of him, in forgetting to give God that place in his life. When he said that he would eat, drink, and be merry the problem came when he attributed his ability to do those things to his full barns instead of his gracious God. And that night, when God demanded his life from him, he found that his false gods could not help him one bit – that they were meaningless (or vain) as gods.

Now, you and I might not be as wealthy as that rich man of the parable; I *know* we are not as wealthy and powerful and wise as was Solomon. But we have the very same temptation which confronted them: to put our trust in things rather than in God; to put our confidence in creatures instead of the Creator. For example, when we get hungry, we think of our full refrigerator or well-stocked grocery store. When we get sick, we call the doctor or head to the medicine cabinet. When we need clothes, we pull out the checkbook. When we need comfort and support, we go to our family and friends. And there is nothing wrong with any of those things; God has given them to us for that very purpose. Yet, how often do we forget that **He** has given them to us? How often do we put our trust, our hope, in them and not the One who came them to us? And when those things fail us – as they so often do – when our pantry is empty, when the doctor can’t help us, when the bank account is overdrawn – do we experience that same feeling as Solomon?

As Christians, we have to learn to distinguish the gifts from the Giver, and to place our hope and faith in the Him. And that’s not always easy to do. We can see and touch and experience the gifts that God gives to us, but it is much harder to see and know Him. That’s why it is so easy to fall into idolatry: we tend to worship that which is close at hand. And so without realizing it, or even intending it, we fall prey to making earthly things our gods, as did Solomon or the rich man from the parable. It’s not that we intentionally say “I will worship money” or “I will bow down to the god of health” or “I will worship at the altar of power”. No, it is ever so slowly that we slip into such false worship, into believing that these things give us and our lives happiness and meaning.

We don’t plan on having these other things steal God’s place in our hearts and lives, but they often do. They creep in, ever so quietly, ever so unobtrusively, without much notice on our part. And they remove our focus from God, replacing it with something else. Remember the First Commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.” But is He first in our lives? Or have we let something steal that place?

It seems that as our nation has gotten wealthier, as we have acquired more and more gizmos and gadgets, more leisure time and hobbies, more money and possessions, we have only created more idols in our lives. People talk about the “good old days” and simpler times – but maybe part of that nostalgia is a longing for a time when God’s place in our hearts and lives, in our worlds, was more clear. Now it seems as if everyone is running here and there, working to get this and that, too busy for Sunday worship and daily devotions and family prayers.

“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” Those words from an Israelite of 3000 years ago so aptly and accurately describe the feelings of many modern Americans, maybe even some of us here today. We have so much, and yet it is never enough and it does NOT make life meaningful.

So what's the answer? What is it that *does* give life true and lasting meaning? Listen to St. Paul's answer from our Epistle lesson:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Paul reminds us of that which alone gives life any real meaning or value: God's love to us in the sacrifice of our Savior Jesus Christ. It wasn't just the rich or powerful or famous that God loved, that He came from heaven to save. No, it was *everyone* – rich or poor, powerful or weak, famous or unknown. **You** are included in that group; **I** am in that group. We have meaning and value, not because of what we have or possess or do, but simply because God has given us meaning and value. Such great meaning and value that He would send His Only-Begotten Son into our flesh and blood, to live this same life we live, to suffer the same disappointments we suffer, to endure the same pain and to experience the same pleasures we have. To take our place under the Law, to take our place on the cross, to take our place in hell, to take our place in the grave. And then to rise again, to open heaven to us, to ascend into heaven ahead of us – so that we too might have eternal life with Him.

As Christians, as those who believe the Good News that Jesus has done literally everything to redeem us – to buy us back from the meaninglessness and vanity which our sin has made our lives – we know the true meaning of life. It is God's gracious, infinite, unending, undying love for us in Christ. We know that our sins – ALL of them – have been forgiven. We know that God gives us many good gifts – home, family, work, leisure, possessions, and health among them – but that His greatest gift is Jesus Christ, crucified for our salvation, and the Holy Spirit given to create/sustain faith within us. And that He does all that using the humble Word and sacraments that the world disparages and ignores. We know that THIS is what makes life good: to be able to call God our Father again, in Christ Jesus, by the power and working of the Holy Spirit. We know that this also gives us eternal life with Him forever.

And so we strive to do as St. Paul encourages: to fix our hearts and minds on things above instead of earthly things. Not because earthly things are bad or have no worth, but simply because they cannot and do not give meaning to life. Likewise, we strive to fix our hearts on things above because it is only when we have our hearts centered in and on Christ that we can use those other gifts in the meaningful way that God intends. And, as we enjoy each of those gifts, the earthly as well as the spiritual, we give thanks to the One who has given them to us. The One who has taught us how to accept and use them -- in service to Him and our neighbor.

Solomon appeared to have it all. But when he lost sight of God's promises, when he looked only at the gifts and not the Giver, when he focused on himself and not on the coming Christ, then he had nothing. But when we have Christ, then we have everything – even if it might appear we have nothing – for in Him we have been made the very sons of God. All things are yours! So rejoice and be merry, whatever your earthly situation, for the Kingdom is yours! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.