

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, August 1, 2004
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 13-14; 2:18-23; Psalm 49:1-12;
Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The child took her plastic wand and swooshed it around in the soapy water. Then, with a flourish, she blew a great breath of air into the hole on the stick, and out of its hole came one perfectly round and luminescent bubble after another. They bounced along, carried aloft by the summer breeze. Some moved erratically to and fro; others took a more settled, sedate journey. But all eventually disappeared. Early on, one bubble hit the porch railing and “POP!”—a splash of soapy water droplets was all that remained. One hit the bush in the front yard, instantly bursting into nothingness by the pinprick of an evergreen needle. Some simply vanished into thin air, and when the child blinked her eyes, the bubbles were gone. Nothing left of the spherical works of art she created. Had she been finger-painting or working with Playdoh, there would have been something to show for all her effort. But she could blow bubbles until every soapy droplet was gone, and there would be no lasting treasure of light-catching bubbles to hold onto. That didn’t particularly bother the child, but an adult might well see the utter futility in blowing bubbles—a meaningless action of human breath dissipating into the air.

“Vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity” states the narrator right from the beginning of the book of Ecclesiastes. Not vanity in the sense we often use it—the quality of being vain about one’s self or one’s appearance. Rather, the word translated here actually means “breath” or “mist” and has to do with the transitory nature of things, how fragile life’s accomplishments are, the impermanence of our possessions. So we read in Ecclesiastes that life is vain. Fleeting as breath itself. Like bubbles bursting and disappearing forever—that’s where all our labors and activities and efforts eventually go—nowhere.

Doesn’t the writer of Ecclesiastes sound like a fun guy to be with? The kind we’d invite to a party for a good time? Still, read this entire book and you learn that this man was a student of life. He studied the world. He checked things out, experimented with all that life had to offer, in order to see what lasting pleasures it would yield and what activities might hold real meaning. Apparently he had the money and resources for such an experiment, so he pursued it to the hilt. He planted vineyards for himself, built a magnificent house, purchased slaves to do his every bidding, hired minstrels to sing for him. He had everything a person could possibly want. Only it really didn’t make him happy. He was like a kid on the day after Christmas who laments, “There’s nothing to do.” Nothing truly fulfilled him. Nothing satisfied for very long. So, now in our lesson he acts as teacher for us, offering his insights, depressing as they may seem.

In today's passage, he refers specifically to his hard labor. He has slaved away under a hot sun, but what good did that do? Through his efforts he has accumulated much. But he'll die, of course, and he can't take it with him, and there will always be someone else there to enjoy the fruits of his labor—someone who did not do a bit of that toiling. The very idea throws our writer into despair and anger: This is vanity! This is futility! Repeatedly he says that life is but a chasing after wind. Life is as meaningless and futile as trying to catch one of those bubbles and keep it in your hand.

Now, the difference between the writer of Ecclesiastes, whose research has led him to this conclusion, and the rich man in Jesus' parable, is that the rich man hasn't yet reached that conclusion. He won't have the chance to reach that conclusion, even though he, too, has labored and invested and achieved and prospered and succeeded just as the man in our First Lesson had. He won't have the chance to reach the conclusion that life is futile because he's going to die that very night. The book of Ecclesiastes would be considered wisdom literature in the Old Testament, a teaching tool in Judaism. The rich man in Jesus' parable, however, is called a fool.

But didn't he do all the right things? Didn't he do what is in fact part of the American dream? Wasn't he the rugged individual who worked hard and saved up, so he could reap the rewards of such diligence, and keep the economy churning, and not rely on anyone else, particular living off the welfare state, etc., etc., etc.? Nearly every institution in our country will say he was wise. What made him a fool?

He was a fool because he centered his life around his possessions, and they became for him his priority. He considered them **his** possessions, for they had been gathered up by him, stored by him, saved for him. The more he gathered, the **more** he would store and save up for himself. His mistake was thinking the possessions began and ended with him. He did not understand that the possessions were never really **his** at all. They were gifts to him. What made the writer of Ecclesiastes wise? Even though he knew the futility of his labor, he still understood that everything good in life was a gift from God. In that sense he was wise. He refused to be the rugged individualist who tries to achieve all things on his own and for himself. While despairing of the empty experiences of life, he still pointed his face toward the path which involved a relationship with God. Through his experiences, he concluded not that life was in vain, but that life **apart from God** was in vain. In the third chapter of Ecclesiastes he writes, "God has made everything beautiful in its time . . . I know that there is nothing better for us than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live; also that it is God's gift to humans that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil." The notion of self-gain and storing up lasting treasure was a foolish notion, considering the fleeting nature of anything one gained. It was more important simply to be satisfied in a life given by God's hands, even with its limitations and imperfections. Then the writer stated emphatically, "I know that whatever God does endures forever . . ." Bubbles burst in mid-air, but God and his creativity and power and purpose remain intact forever.

One theologian I know said Ecclesiastes is the most Christian book in the Old Testament. No, it doesn't discuss Jesus Christ, doesn't refer to any sort of resurrection

or life after death. But it is a ruthless expose on what human life is really like, apart from God. Ecclesiastes doesn't just prepare you and me to hear the gospel. It literally drives us straight to that good news of Jesus Christ, the enduring gift of God's self to us and the eternal source of life and meaning for us, and that is real treasure.

This fool in the parable does not realize life itself is a gift. When we do not see our possessions as gifts given to us, when we think it best to rely only on ourselves and work only for our own good, then our belongings and our bank accounts and our very beings become our center, our priority. And the fear of losing those things drives us and all our actions, with the potential of driving us to despair.

Such fear can be seen in the words of the man who prompted Jesus to tell this parable in the first place. Someone in the crowd calls out to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." The man doesn't ask about eternal life, about God's will and purpose, about how to be a disciple. The man wants Jesus to resolve a financial dispute between this man and his brother. It's clear that God and his kingdom aren't at the center of this man's life. Apparently a good relationship with his brother isn't central for him either. He wants the money. That's his center. That's what drives him. That becomes his ultimate concern, to the neglect of his brother and the neglect of his God.

The writer Florence Ferrier tells a story about a social worker in poverty-stricken Appalachia. One family the social worker visited was the Sheldons. They were a large family, in serious financial trouble. Yet, with some help and creativity, they managed to eke out a living, and did so without complaint. During one of her visits, the social worker was handed a jar of bear meat. Mr. Sheldon had managed to shoot the bear, and the meat had been processed in all the big canning jars they could scrounge. The social worker hesitated to accept the gift, knowing the Sheldons' need. Mr. Sheldon said firmly, "Now you just have to take this. We want you to have it. We don't have much, that's a fact; but we ain't poor!" She wondered aloud the difference, and Mr. Sheldon explained: "When you give something away, even when you don't have much, then you ain't poor. When you don't feel easy giving something away even if you got more'n you need, then you're poor, whether you know it or not." Do you see? Mr. Sheldon's possessions were not his center.

Well, the social worker accepted their gift of bear meat, and the lesson she learned from them. When we know that all we have is provided by God, we can trust that, as she put it, "our needs will be met without our clinging to every morsel."

Jesus tells the man “. . . one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” He urges him to be “rich towards God.” In other words, let God and our relationship with him be our center, our priority. Let all good things be received by us as gifts, and understood as the extravagance of God’s love. If that student of life in Ecclesiastes is right—that whatever God does endures—then his loving and his giving and his blessings will go on in abundance, growing exponentially in our hands. Not so that we can build bigger barns and hoard the blessings away, but so that these gifts of ours can be shared, and become blessings for others. AMEN.

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