

“Meaning In A Meaningless World”

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

August 4, 2013

11th Sunday After Pentecost

In Charles Dickens famous story, *A Christmas Carol*, Jacob Marley comes back from the dead in the form of a ghost with a message for his business partner in life, Ebenezer Scrooge, about showing love and charity during the Christmas season. The message, designed to help Scrooge change, was based on Marley’s experience in life and his personal failure in the area of love and charity. Thus, the message carried some weight with it. It is helpful to have a voice from the past to learn about the future – if we will only listen.

That’s what we have here today in our text from Ecclesiastes. The author, Solomon, son of David and king over Israel in Jerusalem, speaks to us about our relationship with and attitude toward wealth and material possessions. King Solomon is eminently qualified to speak about this topic. He had it all – wealth, women, power – more than he could have ever imagined. The wealth of Solomon was known throughout the world at the time. He had 700 royal wives and 300 concubines (or “common wives”). The kingdom of Israel was never bigger or more powerful than it was during the time of King Solomon.

So Solomon can speak about wealth and materialism. He writes, “I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.” In other words, he has researched the whole topic of materialism. His conclusion? “I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.” All we have is vanity. All we strive to get is vanity. Everything is vanity – empty, foolish, useless. Trying to achieve happiness and satisfaction through wealth and material possessions is like trying to catch the wind. You’ll never succeed.

What’s the problem? There is nothing inherently wrong or sinful with wealth or material things. We are not “anti-fun” people who say that the things of this world are evil. We are not ascetics –

people who try to escape the world by giving up all their possessions and denying themselves any pleasure or enjoyment.

This world and the things in it are good because they were created by God to be good and to be used and enjoyed by people. The Word of God says, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.” (1 Timothy 4:4)

The problem with wealth and material goods and what is sinful is our attitude toward them. The first attitudinal problem is our desire for and love of material things. It is not money that is a root of all evil, but *the love* of money which is a root of all evil. Loving material things can lead to violation of the 1st Commandment – “You shall have no other gods” which the Catechism says means “You shall fear, love and trust in God above all things.” This meaning is reflected in St. John’s first epistle where he writes, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world.” (1 John 4:15-16)

Of course, no one would say they love wealth or material things more than God. It is our actions which reveal our true attitudes and feelings. Are we more devoted to our possessions or to our God? Do we possess our possessions or do they possess us? Are we more eager to receive the gifts of God or the things of this world? Do our priorities reflect our confession of faith or conflict with it?

Our second attitudinal problem is our dissatisfaction with the material things we have. This has been a problem since the original sin. Although the Lord had given Adam and Eve everything they could possibly want or need, they ultimately weren’t satisfied for, if they were, they could never have been tempted to want more. Yet they wanted what they didn’t have – the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – and so they took it.

We often are not satisfied with what we have. We always want more stuff. We want bigger and better stuff. We want new and improved stuff. We never seem to be satisfied. Martin Luther

puts it this way, “This is the vanity of the human heart, that it is never content with the gifts of God that are present but rather thinks of them as negligible; it continually looks for others, and then still others, and is not satisfied until it achieves what it wishes, whereupon it despises what it has achieved and looks for something else.” (LW XV, p.10)

King Solomon had loved material goods and was successful in obtaining a lot of it. Yet he was never really satisfied no matter how much wealth he had; no matter how many women he had; and now matter how much power he had. At the end of his life, he pens the words of our text and calls it “all vanity” – empty, foolish, and useless. He would die, having turned away from the Lord under the influence of his foreign wives, enemies rebelling against him, and his country on the verge of civil war.

Solomon, having achieved all that he desired in materials good, saw things more clearly than we do as we pursue material goods. First, he noticed the temporary nature of material goods. Although they seem important and necessary, they will not last. Everything we have and everything we strive to have will be lost, break down, or be destroyed. In the coming judgment, all will be destroyed. St. Peter warns us of this in his second epistle, “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.” (2 Peter 3:10) Why do we spend so much time, effort, and energy on things that will not last? All is vanity.

Secondly, Solomon notices the temporary nature of existence itself. You work hard to accumulate lots of things and – poof! – you die (just like Jesus’ story in our Gospel reading). What becomes of your stuff? Not only can you not take it with you (there are no U-Haul trailers attached to hearses), but you leave all of your stuff which you worked so hard to have to someone who hasn’t worked for it to enjoy. All of that hard work ends up being a complete waste of time in the long run. As Solomon laments, “a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days

are full of sorrow and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.” (Ecc. 2:21-23)

It all sounds pretty depressing. And it is – if we use all our time, efforts, and energy to chase the wind and pursue what is empty vanity. Is there no hope? Is there no possession which we might have that lasts? Is there no way to enjoy life or must it all be vanity? In order for that to happen, the Preacher of Ecclesiastes must give way to another Preacher. Solomon must yield to Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ came into this world for the expressed purpose of working hard to gain possessions. But it was not wealth, material goods, or power that He sought. He came to re-possess the souls of men, women, boys, and girls who He had created but who had been taken from Him by the corrupting nature and separating power of sin.

Jesus toiled hard under the sun to obtain you and me as His possession. The work was difficult – more difficult than any job ever undertaken. The price He paid was high – higher than all the wealth of the world. As the Catechism reminds us, “[He] has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.”

By Jesus’ death on the cross, your sins have been paid for and you have been purchased. You now belong to Jesus. And, in your union with Him in Holy Baptism, He now belongs to you. All that Jesus is and has by virtue of being the Son of God is now yours. You have His blessing which never runs out. You have His life which never ends. All other possessions may come and go, but what He gives to you never leaves. All other life may and will end, but yours will never end.

Jesus’ resurrection from the dead confirms all of this. His life is your life. His life passed through the grave to the exultation of heaven. Yours will, too. The amount of possessions you have or don’t have in this life cannot affect that, change that, or take it from you. Even death cannot prevent you from living in joy and contentment. You shall live with such joy and such contentment

that you cannot even imagine now. As the Word of God reminds us, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Cor. 2:9)

How do we deal then with possessions and life which Solomon labeled as “vanity?” We have a different way of viewing these things through Christ. We look through “resurrection eyes” to see the big picture of what is ours through Jesus Christ, instead of just focusing on materialistic cravings of the present moment. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we are freed from the vanity and pursuit of possessions. With our eternity assured for us by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, what we possess temporally is not nearly that important. When you have eternal life, how important is the next best electronic gizmo? We will possess our possessions. They will not possess us. With Job, who lost everything (and later received it back again), we can deal with disappointment and say, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” (Job 1:25) And we can learn contentment with St. Paul who said, “for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.” (1 Tim. 6:7-8)

This does not mean we lead a dull and dreary life, devoid of any wealth or possessions. We are now free to truly enjoy all material blessings which God gives us. Enjoyment and contentment are true gifts of God. They are not determined by the amount or lack of possessions. That’s what Solomon says in our text, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?” As we are in relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ, we will enjoy and be content with any and all possessions whether they be great or few.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge was fortunate because he listened to Marley’s words about love and charity which had been based on Marley’s experiences. His life was filled with joy and never was the same from that moment. Will we listen to Solomon’s words about possessions based on Solomon’s experiences? Or will we repeat Solomon’s mistakes and keep chasing wealth and striving

for material things? If our lives are focused on wealth and controlled by possessions, we will never truly be happy or content no matter how much we have. That is vanity and striving after wind. When our lives are in Christ, we will always be joyful and content no matter how little we have. That is a gift of God and true salvation. May it always be yours! Amen