

8 Pentecost, Proper 13, Yr. C

August 4, 2019

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23, Colossian 3:5-17, Luke 12:13-21

There's a common thread in all the readings today, including the psalm. And that is the question about ultimate concern: **WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN THE END?** And there's also the question about death – what does it mean for the way we live our lives that death is a reality that will come to each of us?

Look first at Ecclesiastes. The writer there, called “the teacher,” sets out, he says, “to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.” But after he tried most everything, pleasure, laughter, wine, building things, owning things and people, he decides that it's all vanity, all just so much emptiness, all chasing after the wind. Actually a better translation is futility. It's all so futile, he thinks, this unhappy business that God has given to human beings. There are a couple of things about the text worth noticing. The first is the complete self-centeredness of his experiment. Notice the frequent use of the pronouns “I” and “myself” – I built houses for MYSELF...I made MYSELF gardens and parks...I made MYSELF pools.... And if you think about what's really bugging him, it's not so much that these things haven't given him some kind of satisfaction, but that he's going to have to die and leave it all to someone else, who might be wise or foolish, or at the very least, someone who didn't toil for it like he did. It's the fact of DEATH that really spoils everything for him. What he's so upset about is that in the end, you can't take it with you, as the saying goes, although I'm sure you've all heard the story of the woman who wanted to be buried in her Cadillac because, she said, she'd worked too hard for it to leave it behind. The undeniable fact that he's going to die makes everything he does in life seem like nothing more than futility.

It's the same theme in Luke, with the parable about the rich man who didn't have enough room in his current barns to store his abundant crops. This too is a story about death. While he's contemplating building bigger and better barns and congratulating himself on his material success, you'll note that he uses the first part of an old adage, “EAT, DRINK AND BE

MERRY...” But he leaves out the rest: FOR TOMORROW WE DIE. And the text says he’s abruptly reminded of that fact when God says, “You fool, this very night your life is being demanded of you.”

Both of these men are living with clouded judgment. The first because he sees only that his death somehow makes his life worthless and futile and the second because he doesn’t even take his inevitable death into consideration.

The psalm picks up these same themes: The wise die like the dull and stupid; they will be in the grave, even though they have lands named after them and even though they are honored.

So the question is posed to us: In the face of the fact that each of us will die, in the face of our need to be responsible for how we live our lives and that we will be asked to account for our decisions when it’s all over, HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE? What should be our ultimate, overriding concern? We know, from the great commandments, that our answer should be about loving God and neighbor. And we also know that that sounds easier than it is. There are lots of distractions.

And for Jesus, two of the biggest of those distractions are money and possessions. You’ll note, in the Gospel, that he isn’t condemning wealth. He’s not saying anything about material goods per se. What he’s worried about is our attitude toward them. He’s worried because we aren’t here to build bigger barns, but to lead better, more loving lives. His concern about money and material stuff is that they can seduce us and become idols, taking first place in our lives. And it’s worth noting that it’s a seduction to which we’re all liable, whether we’re rich or poor. Those who have wealth worry about keeping it; those who don’t can covet it and worry about getting it. But both are captivated by it. I’m sure you’ve heard that in the Bible, material wealth is the topic of 16 out of 38 parables and 1 out of 10 verses. There are 500 verses about prayer, less than 500 about faith and more than 2000 about money and possessions. That’s a reflection both of how powerful they are and how much a temptation they are. So what Jesus is saying here is BE CAREFUL. Be on guard against putting possessions

first, because as a line a bit later in this gospel today says, where your treasure is, there your heart is also. And our hearts are meant, first and foremost, for God.

So, back to the central question: What matters in the end? Or, put another way: to what should I devote my one precious life? Someone has said that we can spend all our lives climbing the ladder only to find that the ladder was leaning against the wrong wall. A couple of weeks ago, I took a course on WWI at Bjorklunden (more about that a bit later) but on the first day, a comment was made, certainly by someone surveying the incredible devastation and suffering caused by that war, that REGRET was the saddest word in the language. And perhaps the good news in this morning's gospel is that, if we heed Jesus' warning we won't, at the moment of our death, be overwhelmed by the knowledge of a wasted life, or by regret.

This Gospel passage is often talked about in terms of greed or covetousness. Sometimes the word used is "concupiscence". That word simply means disordered desires: something that's given more weight than it should have. Paul Tillich is said that it means something like trying to "cram the whole world into my mouth." But that's a very human temptation. It's worth noting here that one of the Hebrew words for human is "nefesh" and it means something like an empty gullet – an open throat – in other words, humans can be like black holes, like never satisfied bundles of desires, always wanting more. Theologians commenting on this tell us that that is tied to a deep-seated sense of our fragility and our insecurity because of that fragility. So, perhaps underlying that greed is a sense of anxiety – that we won't be OK, and that, ultimately, God can't be trusted. Remember the story about the atheist who falls off a cliff and is hanging on by a branch, calling for help? God responds and says he'll help, but asks "Do you believe in me?" And the fellow says, "Yes, yes, of course I do." And God replies, "Then let go of the branch." There's a moment's silence and then the fellow yells out, "Is there anyone else up there?"

This Gospel is an invitation to reflect on our lives. On where we are putting our ultimate loyalty, on where we find our security. Jesus wants us to move

beyond that inordinate self-centeredness into a vision of the kingdom. God's rule, he says, is sweeping the world with love and power so that all people can be secure in the knowledge that God and God's vision is controlling. It does seem to me that this would be a lot easier if God would just make it happen but, for our own good, he's inviting us to participate in making it happen. And that brings me back to the WWI class. One of the teachers organized the material about the countries getting into the war by looking at what they wanted and what they feared. In a way, it was very similar to what we've been talking about on an individual level, only this was going on on a national and international level. They wanted MORE, more land, more respect, more colonies, more security and they feared that they would lose what they had. One of the books we read was by Margaret McMillan, the granddaughter of Harold McMillan, a later Prime Minister. In writing about the countries that got into the war she had this to say: "If we want to point fingers from the 21st century we can accuse those who took Europe into war of two things. First, a failure of imagination in not seeing how destructive such a conflict would be and second, their lack of courage to stand up to those who said there was no choice left but to go to war. There are always choices." But those two things: failure of imagination and failure of courage apply to our individual moral and ethical lives as well. Through the lens of these scriptures, I suggest that we're being asked to imagine – imagine what God's Kingdom will look like and then to take courage – the courage to live the kind of life that will help make that kingdom a reality. We have that choice. Amen.