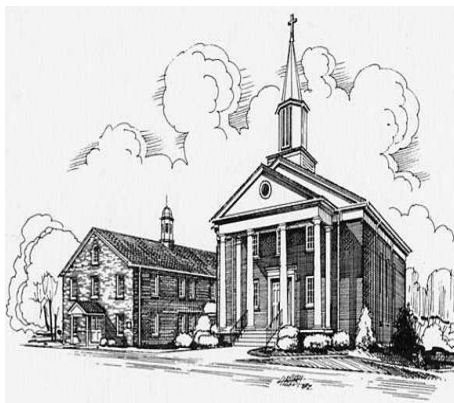


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sunday closest to August 3

Proper 13

Year C RCL



Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Psalm 49:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

The Collect

Let your continual mercy, O Lord, cleanse and defend your Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without your help, protect and govern it always by your goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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.

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me – and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes

one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

The Response

Psalm 49:1-11

Audite haec, omnes

1 Hear this, all you peoples;
hearken, all you who dwell in the world, *
you of high degree and low, rich and poor together.

2 My mouth shall speak of wisdom, *
and my heart shall meditate on understanding.

3 I will incline my ear to a proverb *
and set forth my riddle upon the harp.

4 Why should I be afraid in evil days, *
when the wickedness of those at my heels surrounds me,

5 The wickedness of those who put their trust in
their goods, *
and boast of their great riches?

6 We can never ransom ourselves, *
or deliver to God the price of our life;

7 For the ransom of our life is so great, *
that we should never have enough to pay it,

8 In order to live for ever and ever, *
and never see the grave.

9 For we see that the wise die also;
like the dull and stupid they perish *

and leave their wealth to those who come after them.

10 Their graves shall be their homes for ever,
their dwelling places from generation to generation,

*

though they call the lands after their own names.

11 Even though honored, they cannot live for ever; *
they are like the beasts that perish.

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You

fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

SERMON

I was in the men's room at a restaurant not long ago. I washed my hands, then turned to get a towel. A device on the wall recognized my need and responded by dispensing a paper towel. What, exactly, was that device saying about me? I'm too frail to pull out a paper towel without the assistance of an electric motor? It's really a pointless device, but I notice they are ubiquitous now. Every men's room seems to have one. What in the world for? It seems so pointless to install an electric line to power a device that does something anyone can do for themselves. These were my thoughts as I started my car, which had sensed the key fob in my pocket so that I didn't have to dig my keys out of my pocket to engage the ignition. Because that would be, you know, like...hard or something.

It's not very challenging, once you have focused

your attention on it, to see that the automatic towel dispenser and the key fob starter are pointless uses of resources. Mostly, we just use the towel, throw it in the trash, then hurry back to the fascinating woman we left to wash our hands. Focus is hard for us. There are so many distractions! As the old saying goes, “When you are up to your neck in alligators, it’s hard to remember that your objective was to drain the swamp.” But the Teacher, the author of Ecclesiastes, really wants us to focus on the pointless drains on our resources which we pursue so absentmindedly. Recognizing them for what they are will allow us to live with intentionality, free of distractions.

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.

For me, anyway, “vanity” means an excessive interest in looking good, and that’s maybe not such a bad way to look at it. An awful lot of our attention is spent devising ways to look good in the eyes of others by, say, magically starting your car without a key, so “vanity” is an appropriate translation. On the other hand, the Hebrew word being translated as “vanity” is *hebel*. *Hebel* actually means “vapor” or “breath”. That's why the Teacher closes this little passage with “all is vanity and a chasing after wind.”

In describing human life as vapor or breath, the Teacher is telling us that life is brief and beyond our

control. Life is vapor because the world goes on unchanged in spite of all our frantic activities; because things slip through our fingers when we try to grasp them and through our minds when we try to understand them; because nothing lasts, yet everything stays the same; because it ends in death, and we have no control over the future.¹ Focusing on this will just suck the motivation from your mind.

So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it.

Yet despair is also a mistake, for the Teacher indicts this as well.

This also is vanity and

¹ Peter Leithart

<http://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/1/what-translation-best-translates-the-word-vanity-in-the-kjv-in-ecclesiastes>

a great evil.

Just what are we supposed to do, then? Striving with the demands of living is vanity. Collapsing in despair is vanity.

What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Or, as Michael Jackson sang, “You can’t win, you can’t break even, and you can’t get out of the game.” If we don’t apply ourselves to the demands of life, we will become a burden to others into whose care we are given. If we reap to the edges of our fields, piling up wealth we don’t need and can’t enjoy, we do so at the expense of those whose need is great, increasing their misery. Certainly, we want to have our head in the game, but maybe we’re mistaken about what game was

scheduled? Maybe we showed up at the game in full pads and helmet, but everybody else was warming up in the batter's cage?

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Next week, thanks to your generosity, I will go on my annual retreat to the Archabbey of St. Meinrad. I will spend the weekend with the Benedictine monks of St. Meinrad in study and prayer. What sort of game are the monks playing, in contrast to our chosen game? Their website describes the daily work of a monk in this way:

A common misconception is that monks do

nothing but pray all day in silence. While prayer is obviously a large and meaningful part of our life, we find its complement in the work we do - work that helps to support us, give meaning to our lives and build up the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Every day, the monks of Saint Meinrad Archabbey go about the ordinary tasks of teaching, cleaning, caring for our sick, welcoming guests, offering retreats, operating a printing press, and running a seminary and school of theology.

The monks find in their work a complement to prayer for the work they do helps support them, gives meaning to their lives, and builds up the Kingdom of God here on earth. Yet, the individual monks own nothing; all work for the welfare of the community, and all share in its success. All find both their worth and their life within the community. Compare that to the parable Jesus told:

Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’

But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Are you getting a sense of the contrast here? All that hard work you put in, the long hours, the long nights you worried yourself sick so that you could afford a car that starts itself, didn't give to you the gift the monks derive from their work and prayer.

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me – and who knows whether they will be

wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.

All that effort was vapor, a breath in the wind, vanity of vanities and the effort you expended upon it distracted you from your calling, to give meaning to your life, and to build up the Kingdom of God here on earth.

God did not bring about the miracle that is you so that you could enjoy electric hand towel machines. Your life, your very existence upon this planet, has meaning, even if you haven't found it yet. Go, church! Seek your calling!

AMEN

BENEDICTION

In closing, I want to remind you of our prayer of confession. We prayed:

Merciful God, we live in a society that focuses on gathering things. We collect, store, gather items, gadgets, even people. We focus our energies on our collections providing adequate room for them and yet we bar the door to the needs of others, of those who have little or nothing, of those for whom life has been a constant struggle. We are sorry for the ways in which we have failed you. Forgive us. Turn us around to look at the ways in which our wealth, both of substance and spirit, can be used for healing and hope. Enable us to be in ministry to those in need and to care for this world. For we ask this in Jesus' Name.

I could add nothing to that. Go in peace

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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