

Lectionary 18C 2019, Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23; Luke 12:13-21, August 4, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

You work hard all your life. You sacrifice and save. From an early age wise people tell you to study hard in school, listen to those in authority, show some initiative, be creative, and you will enjoy the finer things in life. But for what? Someday, somebody else will take it all over and your legacy will be forgotten. Or worse. What took a lifetime to accomplish can be wasted away in a moment.

The Wise Teacher, the traditional author of Ecclesiastes, paints a rather gloomy picture. “All is vanity,” he says. Maybe a better translation, one that doesn’t get mixed up with someone always looking at themselves in the mirror might be, “All is futility.” “Futility, futility, all is futility.” “All my toil...I must leave 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.”

Wow, do those words hit home for me. Thirty two years I’ve labored as pastor, leading you in praise of God, preaching the Word, teaching the faith, trying to be an example of servanthood. Yet someone will come after me. And they will lead you. I hope they are wise. I hope they are faithful. Yet I know I do not control that future. It will be out of my hands.

Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.

Forward to our gospel reading this morning. Here’s the setting: Jesus is teaching the crowds; anticipating a future time of persecution for their faith. “Do not fear those who kill the body,” Jesus says, “but fear the one who can kill the soul. God will take care of you. Remember the sparrows and how God takes care of them. You are more valuable than many sparrows.” Then a man interrupts Jesus. “Teacher. My older brother is being greedy. My father died and he’s keeping all the good stuff for himself. Mom promised me I’d get his nice gold watch and favorite fishing rod. My brother says because he’s older he should get it. Tell him to divide it up fairly.”

Jesus bristles impatiently. Our reading this morning waters down his sharp rebuke. Not a friendly “Friend.” But rather, “Listen, Mac. Didn’t you hear what I just said? The time is coming when you’ll have more important things to worry about than your lousy little inheritance. Besides, who appointed me as your inheritance judge? I’m telling you now, beware of getting greedy or you’re going to miss the boat.”

And then Jesus tells what is my favorite parable in the whole Bible. Favorite, because it’s so easy to see myself in it. A rich man enjoys a bountiful year of bumper crops. More than he has ever enjoyed before. He rakes in so much he needs to tear down his old barns and build bigger ones. And then, when all the

barns are built, he sits back; richer, fatter, and happier, ready to enjoy all the many years ahead of him, comfortable and content. But God said, “You foolish little man! Tonight you will die! And you know who’s going to get your crops? The government, that’s who. And will they respect your wishes on how it should all be spent? You can bet your life they won’t!”

In the strongest possible way Jesus warns the man, and us, about the perils of possessions possessing us. It’s not that Jesus believes possessions are inherently evil. But the problem always lies in the possessor’s relationship to his or her possessions. In the case of the rich barn builder he believed his possessions secured his future. Secured him with a promise to weather the winds of change the future might bring. Little did he count on the biggest change of all, the end of his own life.

Jesus uses this parable to point us in a different direction. “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves, but are not rich towards God.” What does Jesus mean when he says we are to be rich towards God? Here is where the rest of Luke’s gospel helps us. Throughout the gospel Jesus tells his listeners to do things. Trust God. Share what you have. A few verses later Jesus says, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear....your Father knows that you need them.”

Followers of Jesus are to take a realistic, almost detached, view concerning possessions. Possessions aren’t bad. Indeed, one may positively delight in earthly things, in their beauty, and in the way they bring a certain joy to living. This is, in fact, the advice of the author of our first reading, who, after he points out that we will all die anyway, we should then enjoy each day and the delights they bring. But possessions do not guarantee against the uncertainties of the future. Here is the Good News. The future is not uncertain. The future is not a time to be feared. God will indeed see that we have what we need. And because the future is certain, because Jesus lives on the other side of death, our possessions need not possess us. We are freed to use them as instruments of God’s own ministry in the world. We are free to give of ourselves, our possessions, our very lives, to serve the needs of others.

Jesus’ living now transforms the vanity of our labors into a life of meaningful purpose. We don’t just labor for ourselves, to create a lasting legacy to our time here on earth. That was the problem for the man who wanted to build bigger barns. He saw himself as self-sufficient, self-contained, an economy of one. But for those who are joined to Christ in faith and baptism our lives are never merely self-sufficient. We live in relation to God and to the whole world through our neighbor.

So being rich toward God means using what we have as a resource to help those in need. For when we trust in God whose Son rose from the dead we don’t

need possessions to secure our future. And when possessions no longer secure our future we then can live with them in proper perspective. Not as something to hoard in bigger barns, but as the gifts of God to be our daily bread and bread for others. Amen.