

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

August 3, 2025

Faith, Okemos

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

## **Living Under the Sun, Living from Above**

Grace to you and peace...

[Please take a few deep breaths. This will be a difficult sermon to hear, but I ask you to wait with me for the precious good news at the end...]

*Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity... 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 the wind... What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which we 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. [There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw is from the hand of God...] Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:22-24*

In an email sent from Kalea on Wednesday, I invited you to read the entire book of Ecclesiastes. It is a sobering, largely dark assessment of the human story “under the sun.” If you had time to read it, I like to take a couple of minutes now to hear a sampling of your reactions...

I think of the tens of thousands in our country whose jobs have been either completely eliminated or made more burdensome. I think of those trying to support themselves and/or their families but are paid far from sufficiently for their work, whose days, in the words of the Teacher, “are full of pain, and their work is a vexation.”

Maybe you, like me, remember projects in which you passionately spent countless hours and perhaps a fair amount of money, all to see

them either immediately or eventually go up in smoke. And don't we see in our own day the erosion of hard-fought protections for the poorest among us or for the people in Gaza or for the well-being of Earth itself?

I remember Dr. Leupold, an Old Testament professor at our seminary in Columbus, who reminded us of the importance of the phrase "under the sun." For him that was key to understanding the darkness and seemingly endless repetition, generation after generation, of the quest for power and the presence of insatiable greed. [Historians don't have to look far to see the parallels of the rich getting richer and poor getting poorer throughout our 250 years as a nation and throughout the thousands of years of the lives and deaths of countless empires, nations, and kingdoms.] So the perspective and wisdom of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes.

Which perspective is then enriched by Jesus' story of the rich man in our gospel for today. Jesus said: *Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.* For the rich man, life under the sun was going great. And yet, as Jesus told them this story [here in the Message translation often read in our Tuesday Bible Studies]: *The farm of a certain rich man produced a terrific crop. He talked to himself: 'What can I do? My barn isn't big enough for this harvest.' Then he said, 'Here's what I'll do: I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll gather in all my grain and goods, and I'll say to myself. "Self, you've done well! You've got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!" Just then God showed up and said, 'Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods – who gets it?' That's what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God."*

Or this last thought in the words in the NRSV translation (in our bulletin): *So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.*

Next Sunday you will hear these further precious words of Jesus: *Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven...* All of which is to say, in Jesus all is not vanity, all is not a chasing after the wind!

Which then takes us to our Second Reading from Colossians 3, words which call us to a live this vexing life above the sun. These words in Colossians don't deny how hard and painful and empty and lonely and, yes, how finite is our life on Earth, our life under the sun. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes counsels a little relief in seizing the moment [Carpe Diem] doing your best to find a measure of enjoyment in your work, in drink... in your eating... But hear again these words: Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, the you also will be revealed with him in glory.

What does that mean, "you have died"? For me that means that in Jesus who died for me, my life is much more than my possessions, whether small or great, cheap or very expensive. My life is not about fulfilling my bucket list before I die. I have already died. My eternal life with God and with all his children has already begun, made sure for us in the gift of holy baptism. That's how powerful is his death on cross for me and for you and for all of creation.

So, the Teacher in writing the book of Ecclesiastes was only partly right. Life is filled with vanity, [we might say 'so full of s\_t']. But it is so much more than that. Hidden in the midst of our trials and tribulations, in our

sorrows and in our fleeting happy moments with a drink and a little food to eat, is this gracious, wonderful gift of life from above. Together with our siblings in Christ and with others of goodwill who do not yet recognize him as their Lord, we get to live an amazing life given to us from above.

For me that life is experienced in daily gratitude for the beauty of the Earth and for all who dwell therein. I'm enriched these days by the sight of countless fields of corn and soybeans, of the gladiolas in our backyard, of the swaying trees, taking in tons of excess CO2 and giving back an abundance of O2. And I think of countless very real people, including you all, who enrich my life and lift me up when I get down or hyper-critical or self-centered, when I'm like the rich man who thought only about himself.

But when our old under-the-sun-self seeks to smother our gratitude for this life from above, when that self tries to make us forget the grace-filled eternal life that Jesus won for us, the Holy Spirit, who may be especially present in the moments we need to take for quiet reflection, will prompt us to put to death that old self filled with greed and lies and malice and abusive language. Martin Luther called it "daily dying" a needful daily discipline putting to death our old self and receiving the precious gift of a new, risen life from above, putting on the clothing of compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, and patience.

I invite you to repeat after me:

In Jesus' name I put to death my old self

And, in Jesus' name, with a grateful heart, I receive today a new, risen life.

Amen.

JDS