

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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August 4, 2019

“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity,” are some of the first things we hear from our Scripture readings today. Hopefully, you picked up on the fact that the author of Ecclesiastes is not speaking about a bathroom remodeling project. Rather, the author is getting us settled in for what is going to be a really tough set of readings. If you hadn’t pre-read today’s readings in the e-newsletter, then with those words, you might have wondered if you could sneak out before you were seen. For today, is going to be a challenging exploration for all of us, myself included.

Very quickly, these readings are going to show us images of ourselves that we don’t particularly like. Like the smog of our industrialized culture overtaking a beautiful day, these texts are quick to convict us. The restlessness of our minds at night, focusing on that which builds up our own appearance and achievements is named as vanity (Ecclesiastes 2:23). Earthly pursuits of greed are clearly labeled as idolatry (Colossians 3:5). And Jesus speaks that the abundance of possessions can easily be connected to greed (Luke 12:15). It’s clear that this is not a Sunday for the faint of heart.

Oftentimes, I’ve heard wish-washy sermons on this text. It’s almost as if preachers try to justify their existence in the western world by trying to make most of Jesus’s parables something that they’re not. As Dr. Skinner puts it, “Those solutions try to keep stories from utterly messing with our self-protective instincts and economic interest. The Good Samaritan becomes about being nice to needy people... This week’s Rich Fool becomes a cute reminder that you never see U-Haul trailers behind

hearses.” While having a reminder to spend more time on things that matter is helpful, that is not what this parable is about. This parable cuts more deeply into us and our way of life.¹

We see the true meaning of the parable by the ways the author of Luke frames it. After all, in verse 15, Jesus begins by saying “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” *That* is the framing for what will come in the parable. But, what comes next seems like a prudent move for the rich man. He had a lot of good fortune from his land. He wondered, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?”¹⁸ 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.’¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” (Luke 12:17-19). That all seems reasonable. It’s easy for us in the United States to wonder why God would call this man a fool. As Dr. Elisabeth Johnson puts it, “Isn’t this man responsible and wise? After all, he has an abundance of crops that would otherwise go to waste. Isn’t this the American Dream that we all strive to achieve? This is why we pay financial advisors so that we can work hard and then sit back and sip our drinks and bask in the fruits of our labor”.²

And that’s the key issue with all of this, the whole parable is about that one man. That one rich person. The parable is about the ways we all only live for ourselves. It’s about the ways we see ourselves as self-made people without any help from anything or anyone else. The parable reminds us of all the ways we believe the lie that those in poverty can pick themselves up by their bootstraps. It reminds us about the ways that

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5368>

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4048

we, like the rich fool, only refer to ourselves saying *I* will do this. *I* will build new barns for my wealth, *I* will store my grain in a 401(k), *I* will make a nest egg for myself, for, *I* am all that matters. But, this parable exposes our tendency to walk into greed.

And, frankly, this greedy image of our society isn't anything new. In the United States, we are the products of greed. While we sit back in horror of four, yes, four mass shooting in one week killing at least 34 people,³ we cannot forget the greed that has led us to this place. Remember, greed, by definition, is “a selfish and excessive desire (such as money) for more of something than is needed.”⁴ The birth of our country was built on the trade and use of guns to grab power from native peoples and build up barns of wealth with slaves.⁵ Guns have been used as a tool to harness power and develop wealth that goes beyond the needs of any person or community. And, the most recent attacks in El Paso⁶ and, possibly, Ohio seem to be motivated by fear of the other. Fear of immigrants taking our jobs. Fear of being forgotten. Fear of our collective future. So, guns have become a tool to capture power, to maintain control, and to sustaining the status quo of greed.

And, Jesus names it, time and again, that greed is idolatry. As Dr. Skinner notes, “Greed compels us to banish anyone who looks like they might threaten ‘what’s our’s.’ Likewise, idolatry constructs worldviews in which self-interest is the cardinal

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/04/us/three-shootings-el-paso-mississippi-gilroy/index.html>

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/greed>

⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2017/11/21/the-american-indian-foundation-of-american-gun-culture/?utm_term=.d42f22ab2e84

⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/08/04/investigators-search-answers-after-gunman-kills-el-paso/?utm_term=.9af3d51aa1bf, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-08-03/el-paso-texas-reports-of-shooting>

virtue. Idolatry lies, whispering that greed for money and possessions won't erode my capacity for community. Idolatry makes fools of us all when it convinces us to create religious justifications for our arrogance and hardheartedness." Idolatry rears its head when we believe that our own safety and secure borders justifies the mistreatment of adults and young children. Idolatry shows itself when our desires demand the lowest prices and the cheapest goods while neglecting the hands and the environments that give us these goods. Idolatry comes in full focus when we realize that because of the greedy grub we've consumed our whole lives, now we are faced with the impacts of our selfish decisions that have wreaked havoc on our global society.

So, what do we do? In today's letter to the Colossians, we have an answer. There we heard, "seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" (Colossians 3:9-11). In our faith in Christ, we are given the opportunity to be renewed in the image of our creator. In baptism, we were given the opportunity to embody a new way of living. And each week, we fail at remembering the larger community. Our selfish ways will always suck us down. But, here we gather to adjust our lives to better live as renewed in our God's grace. And, there is a reason why the Scripture readings and the sermon are a bit earlier in our liturgy. For, after we are confronted, then we can be conformed to God's image. An image we immediately enact as we say prayer with a global flair, but words only go so far. And so, we quickly pass the peace to get our blood flowing for what it looks like to realize that Christ is all and found within all. Hard stop. Whether we like it or not, Christ is in every single person of every faith, of every nation, and every socio-cultural background. And so, we put that into action as we gather at this table. We come here standing with people

from suburbs and city, queer and straight, naturalized and undocumented, darker complexions and lighter complexions, able-bodied and worn-bodies. For, at Christ's table we are fed to be renewed.

And friends, I've gone too long already, so I need to stop. But as I wrap this up, this is only the beginning. For today's readings are difficult and condemning. At the same time, they're liberating and renewing. For, we have been given an opportunity to take God's vision of inter-dependence and put it into practice with the ways we acknowledge the satisfaction of our needs. We're given a gift to realize that through the gift of God working through climate, circumstances, and people we have received an abundance that we are called to share back with the others that have helped us obtain the abundance. We're reminded today that we have a God of abundance who freely shares without exception, a God who overwhelms us with grace, and a God who sends us to enact that vision of love. Amen.