

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost 31 July 2022

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

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Well, there goes the month of July – that was quick. There’s so much to love about summer: the intangible blessings of living near beaches and green spaces, of enjoying family vacation time together. And there are the more material blessings of air-conditioned spaces, automatic icemakers, savoring the local summer crops, and those frozen delights that just taste better in the heat of summer.

We might imagine the Sunday readings this time of year would be in laid-back summer mode too, but that’s not the case this morning. We are invited to focus on serious questions: how to get on with the business of life, to find a meaningful path through it. How do we live with a measure of serenity, an understanding of what life is all about?

These aren’t new questions. We hear in today’s readings that we’re not the first people wondering how to live well, knowing we’ve got all the bases covered so we can relax: eat, drink, and be merry.

Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is from the book of Ecclesiastes, written about 300 years before Christ’s time on earth. The text describes the frustration of the author, who

doesn't see the meaning or worth of the world's values. Gaining knowledge that's considered to be wisdom, working hard, what does it mean in the end? The preacher feels only despair – all is vanity. No achievement feels meaningful; and in the text right after our reading ends *he* decides to just eat, drink, and enjoy his work.

The New Testament letter to the Colossian Christians suggests that what brings meaning to our lives is baptism, which radically remakes us so that Christ is central to our lives: “Christ is all and in all.” Once we can see Christ in each other without excluding anyone, our old sinful human ways won't appeal to us the way they have before.

But that message doesn't really do it, either. This is a Sunday we need to hear from *Jesus* where our treasure lies. How to know our priorities and feel secure, since growth through knowledge or elevating our thinking may not be enough.

And our Savior, who is both teacher and the Word made flesh, does clarify things for us in the parable of the rich man.

This morning Jesus decides to talk about money after refusing to act as probate judge settling a financial dispute between brothers. He describes the main character in the parable, a successful farmer.

We might ask: what's so bad about building bigger barns?

It seems to make sense, if you've had the good fortune of a big harvest, to store it so nothing gets wasted. That's good stewardship, right? This man seems to be a wise, responsible person storing his goods, savings set aside for the future, ready for his golden years. Today the rich farmer might be a good financial advisor, who's worked hard and saved wisely. He's all set to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

Except, he hasn't planned for his reckoning with God, who calls him a fool.

The farmer isn't being called a fool because he's wealthy or saving for the future; it's because he seems to be living only for himself. He believes he can secure his life through his possessions.

Building bigger barns isn't the issue. The farmer doesn't seem greedy or wicked; he may be surprised by his good fortune. But the consistent focus through his conversation with himself is: me, me, me. "What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops? *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..." *et cetera*.

The first-person pronouns – I, me, my – show us someone preoccupied with self. There's no gratitude for his good fortune or for the workers who helped plant and harvest the crop; no thought of using the abundance to help others; no mention of God.

The farmer doesn't see that his life is not his to secure but rather belongs to God, and that God may demand it back at any time.

The farmer isn't foolish for making provision for his future. He's foolish because he believes through wealth he can secure his future, so that now he's set to relax into eat, drink, and be merry mode.

Jesus teaches us today about how seductive wealth can be for us. The author of Ecclesiastes talks of vanity and emptiness – knowing that whatever we've worked hard for in life ends up in someone else's hands eventually. This is a feeling many of us may get when enticed by materialism. No matter how much we have, we're always aware of things we don't have, so we never quite feel we have enough.

We humans are fragile and vulnerable today, just as we were in Biblical times. Maybe because of that insecurity, we can be tempted to seek control over the x factors in life by our own efforts, by what we can accomplish ourselves.

The rich farmer may have grown unaware of the needs of others through the insulation provided by his wealth. He has no concern beyond the contentment of his soul. He doesn't mention the needs of his neighbors, of how his blessings could be a blessing for others. In that sense he's locked in his own world, oblivious to the human needs we all have.

Money can be the elephant in the room for us. It may be easy to see the rich man's foolishness, but how do we avoid the same fate? How do we avoid forgetting that God always blesses us so that we may be a blessing to *others*? How do we avoid assuming our blessings of health or achievement are personal accomplishments, rather than gifts from God that are intended to be shared with others?

We know material abundance isn't enough, and we may strive to avoid the seduction of possessions. So maybe the question isn't "Is material abundance bad?" so much as "Is our material abundance sufficient to offer the meaning and joy that we seek in life?"

Can wealth secure a relative degree of comfort for us? Certainly. Can it grant us the confidence that we're worthy of love and honor and right relationship with God and neighbor? Certainly not.

As we recognize that the gifts of ultimate worth – dignity, meaning, relationship - are gifts freely offered by God, we can hope to see our relative wealth in better perspective, and to be generous with it toward others.

Part of the allure of material wealth is that illusion of self-sufficiency it may offer us. So one thing we can do is seek out the company of others and remain open to their needs – aligning ourselves toward God's mission to bless and redeem the world.

Scripture consistently teaches that we are created to be in relationship, with God and each other. So as we continue in those relationships and seek out others, recognizing the needs of those around us, we're more likely to live into our identity as beloved, interdependent children of God.

It's true that our lives and possessions are not our own; they belong to God. We are the stewards of them for the time God has given us on this earth. And this is good news. Since all that we are and all that we have belongs to God, our future is secure beyond all measure! Jesus tells us, "Do not be afraid; it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

To him together with the Father and the Holy Spirit be all honor and glory, now and forever.

Amen.