

Things, Things, and More Things!
Luke 12:13-21 / Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23
Colebrook Congregational Church
July 31, 2016 / 11th Sunday after Pentecost / Proper 13C / Ordinary 18C

Today's Old Testament reading comes from the Book of Ecclesiastes, which is from the middle section of the Jewish Bible, called The Writings or the Wisdom Books. The other two sections are familiar to us, the Law and the Prophets, as Jesus invokes them frequently in the Gospels. Only once, in all the Gospels, does Jesus invoke this section.

This is also a section of the Bible where there is disagreement over which books should be considered scripture. As Protestants, we follow what the Rabbis decided. Other branches of Christianity include other books, which on their own are good and edifying, but we do not consider them to be at the level of scripture.

Least known of these books is the Song of Songs, a collection of romantic poetry. There is the Book of Job, a poem addressing why the righteous suffer, and then a sequence of three books offering wisdom from three ages of life: Psalms, written by King David in his youth; Proverbs, written by King Solomon in the middle of his life; and lastly, Ecclesiastes, written by King Solomon, as an old man.

This section has had a lot of influence in culture throughout history, inspiring music, operas, movies, and literature. Especially Ecclesiastes, influencing the work of Abraham Lincoln, Tom Wolfe, Leo Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Pete Seeger and many more.

The word Ecclesiastes is a Latin translation of the Greek word translated for the Hebrew title of this book, Qohelet, which means Teacher or Preacher. The theme of this book, offering wisdom from the point of view of Solomon near the end of his life, can seem a bit depressing. Qohelet is speaking about the meaning of life; the best way to live one's life; and how all actions are inherently futile, as both the wise and the fool end in death, but wisdom & a well-lived life is better.

Because of this, my Old Testament professor said that Qohelet really means, “Grumpy Old Man.” And since then, whenever I read this book, I hear it in Jack Lemmon's and Walter Matthau's voices.

In today's selection, Qohelet is speaking about vanities, how everything is vanity. To better understand this, I looked up the Hebrew word and found that the word translated as vanity also means: something without substance, nothingness, and worthlessness. In these verses from Ecclesiastes, Qohelet is telling us that all the work we do just replaces the work of the past, and our work will be replaced by the next generation. That the things we make or gather, will eventually be taken by someone else, who did not toil for those things, once we are gone.

There is a similar theme in Jesus' lesson for us from Luke's Gospel. We skip ahead a chapter from last week and this chapter is about the responsibilities and privileges of discipleship.

A man requests that Jesus arbitrate a matter of inheritance, but Jesus sees this as something for the judges, not Him. There is already a system in place, so He does not need to intervene. Jesus then pivots to address the basic cause that did concern Him, that is, the covetousness, the greed. This was not an ethical argument, but a familial one. Problems like this are solved at the deeper level.

Jesus then challenges the accepted standard of values. Wealth does not equal happiness. Possessions or the love of possessions does not equal fulfillment. Security is not achieved by amassing property.

That seems counter-intuitive, doesn't it? Money can buy us things that make us happy, right? Owning property can give us a safe place to rest, right?

However, Jesus addresses this by continuing with the Parable of the Rich Fool. The wealthy farmer monologues about his earthly abundances. He has too much grain and no place to store it. He tried to apply this to his spiritual life, but that is not how it works.

Jesus reminds us that the earthly materials, and things, and riches offer us no protection against the uncertainty of life, and then they pass into the hands of others. It's like the meaningless vanities that the Grumpy Old Man spoke about.

Everyone collects things. Things that can make us happy. Things that keep us occupied. Things that thrill us through the search. Things that give us pride in displaying. Some people took their collecting to such a level, that the first museums evolved from people displaying their private collections. The Wonder Rooms and Cabinets of Curiosities. And we go and see them, we are amazed and entertained by them. Like the Christmas House in Torrington, which displays the homeowner's collection of nutcrackers inside as well.

But in the bigger picture of things, our own collections are like the vanity that Qohelet speaks of, or the earthly possessions that Jesus speaks of. What we collect and put together, cannot be taken with us, and so it goes away.

Most of you know that I have a huge collection of books. When you visit my Study, you will find yourself surrounded by books. And that isn't even all of them in there! I found my happy place amongst my books. However, I realized the same thing that Qohelet and Jesus preached. That some day, my collection will be broken up and no longer be whole. And I may not even get a say in what happens to my library. What opened my eyes to this reality was a comparison of how my grandparents handled their collections.

My mother told me about her mother's prized possessions. They were sets of china and crystal that she received as presents on her wedding day. But she never even unpacked them. She kept them safely boxed and stored, and she was the only person who even looked at them. When she made out her will, she asked my mom and her sisters who wanted to inherit what pieces of her beloved collection, but was shocked to find that her daughters did not care about it. They knew about the collection, and what it meant to her, but they did not share that connection. They did not use them for Sunday Dinner or special occasions, the collection stayed in the basement in boxes collecting dust. They never even saw the pieces, they only heard about them.

On the other hand, my mother's father collected coins. Whenever my brother and I visited them, he would show us his coins and show us any new additions. We got to touch the coins, and hear him tell stories about the coins, where they were from, and how he found them. He also taught us how to quickly identify valuable coins. And all this happened a couple yards from where grandma stored her beloved china and crystal. While I am not a coin collector, I remember what he taught me, so whenever I handled money, I would catch silver quarters, pre-1964 nickels, and that sort of thing. When he passed, each of the grandkids inherited a portion of his collection, and the value I get from it, is from the memories, and I now proudly display my portion of his collection in a hutch in the Parsonage.

In both cases, a collection was divided, portioned and sent in different directions. The collections do not exist as they once did. With the case of my grandmother's collection, there was no connection to anyone else, and so no one really cared about it. With my grandfather's, he shared his joy of the collection and while his collection was divided, it is held by those who cherish the memories connected with it. I hope that I will follow my grandfather's example in how I handle my earthly possessions, and that when my time comes, someone will feel the same way about my books as I do about my grandfather's coins.

Because in the end, it's just vanity, so we should do things in a wise way that will have meaning, as the Grumpy Old Man said. True security in this life is found with God, and God's gift of the Spirit for us, and God's Love for us. Nothing, not life nor death, not things present nor future, not anything in all of Creation, can separate us from the Love of God we find in Jesus. That is true security. Not in the collecting of things.

Please join me in the spirit of prayer:

God of enduring love, when we find ourselves surrounded by too much stuff, when we want more and more to satisfy us, draw our hearts to You. Direct our hearts away from covetousness, and guide us to handle our earthly possessions in a way that shares our Joys with our loved ones. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

God of salvation, who sent Your Son to seek out and save what is lost, hear our prayers on behalf of those who are lost in our day, receiving these petitions and thanksgivings with your unending compassion.

We give You thanks for all the blessings and lessons You have shared with us. May we always approach You and our neighbors with a grateful heart full of Your Love.

We confess that our sin and pride hide the brightness of Your light, when we turn away from the poor; when we ignore cries for justice; and when we do not strive for peace. Forgive us, God. In your mercy, cleanse us, so that, as forgiven and renewed people, we may reflect the love and life of Jesus Christ into our world.

Be with those who are distraught, those who are without, those who know not peace, those who struggle with addiction, those who are in need, and those who are unwell in mind, body, or spirit. Be with the victims of violence and their loved ones. Help us to comfort them with Your abundant Love. Bless the services of all Your people, and assure them that You are pleased with their work.

We pray that You help lead us through our own trials, the sufferings and sorrows, the challenges and struggles, and back to Your Love. Fill us with hope, sustained in Your mercy, giving us guidance through Your Word, and stamina through Your Spirit.

We especially pray for:

God of justice, Your word is light and truth. Let Your face shine on us to restore us, that we may walk in Your way, seeking justice and doing good. Amen.

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

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.

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, "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."