

C-13 The Meaning of Life
Lk 12:13-21; Ecc 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23
Rev. Larry B. Bell

8-4-19
WPC

Children: Summer no longer looks endless. The return to school is on the horizon and many are focused on getting in as much freedom and “summer” as they can before it ends. ***Even at the end of summer, you are on the job as God’s disciples.*** Just as God is with us always loving us, taking care of us, forgiving us when we need it, so God expects us to be with God always living like God’s children. That means that at the swimming pool, in the back seat of the car on that last trip to the beach or mountains, even when there is nothing to do at home, you are still Jesus’ disciple. You need to be Jesus’ hands and feet taking care of people around you, being kind and loving (even when you don’t feel like it), and even forgiving brothers, sisters and friends when they need it. [from Carolyn Brown]

1. The writer of our Old Testament scripture called himself Qoheleth, the teacher. I imagine him as an older person, looking back over his life, taking inventory of all that he’s done. One by one, he examines various endeavors. He sees his life as kind of a testing ground. He’s a philosopher, and a thinker. He wonders, what is the meaning of it all?
2. He remembers his education. He has read all of the great thinkers and he has acquired great wisdom. But what does it mean? What’s the point of it all? His conclusion? *In much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.* In other words, it’s better to be ignorant and happy. Pretty pessimistic.

3. And then he remembers another chapter in his life. He worked hard and made a lot of money. He built houses and gardens and parks. He had many possessions. He was able to afford entertainment and pleasures that others could only dream of. Yet looking back, he concludes that it was all meaningless and a “chasing after the wind.” Vanity of vanities, he says.
4. What’s the point? You work your whole life long, and at the end it all goes to someone else. Who knows if they will be wise or a fool? Vanity of vanities! All is vanity and a chasing after the wind.
5. He’s getting towards the end of his life, and he’s thinking about death. When you are young, you don’t give it a second thought, but as you get older, you realize that it’s inevitable. What’s the point of life if it’s all going to vanish like a dream?
6. This week while I was looking for an image for the cover of the bulletin, I discovered that there is a genre of art called Vanitas, or vanity. Usually it’s a still life, but instead of the normal table set with a bowl of fruit, in Vanitas, there’s a table, but it’s set with a skull and some old dusty book, an overturned vase and maybe a pocket watch and other symbols of death and decay.
7. The cover of our bulletin is kind of in that same genre. Qoheleth could have done this.
8. Some might say this is a pessimistic view of life. Others might say that it’s just being realistic. The conclusion of Qoheleth, is that you might as well enjoy life while you can, because in the end we all die! So eat, drink, enjoy your toil and your life, because it will soon be over and no one will remember anything about you or your life.
9. So that’s all pretty depressing and I’m sorry to take you there, but I think many people live with this perception of

the meaning of life. You get a job and slave away for 40 or 50 years, and only then do you get to retire and do what you want. And then you die. What kind of a life is that? Is that all a young person has to look forward to? Vanity, empty and meaningless!

10. Our gospel reading provides kind of an answer. Jesus tells a parable of a wealthy farmer who was able to retire at a young age. He has ample goods laid up for many years, so now it's time to party-- eat, drink and be merry!
11. The rich man has enough set aside so that he can retire, take his leisure, enjoy life. He's got enough stored up to last for many years.
12. But like many of Jesus' parables, there is a kicker at the end. He dies before he is able to enjoy the fruit of his labor. Just as Ecclesiastes said, someone else will now enjoy what he worked so hard for. *Vanity, vanity, all is vanity and a chasing after the wind.*
13. But you know, this sounds an awful lot like the idea that many people today have of retirement. Except we don't build bigger barns. Instead we have bigger IRAs and pension funds to sustain us while we eat, drink and be merry.
14. But it's not too hard to see that this vision of life is flawed. Even as a teenager, I was depressed at the prospect of getting a job, slaving away for 40 or 50 years. After all those years of hard work, you get to retire and do what you really want for just a few short years. And then you die. What kind of a life is that? Is that all a young person has to look forward to? It's vanity! Emptiness!
15. In my case, after I started working, I discovered that work is good and satisfying and actually kind of fun to accomplish something. That's true of most of the work

I've done: pastoring, most days is very satisfying; building, doing carpentry, same thing. There's a nobility to providing shelter and producing something that looks good. It feels good to be a productive member of society and get paid for it.

16. And life itself—eating, drinking, enjoying life—as Ecclesiastes says, what could be better? I love a good meal with good friends. Yet, in the end, we all die, like the woman on the front of the bulletin.
17. Jesus takes that very poignant phrase from Ecclesiastes and uses it to point us in a different direction. Though eating, drinking and enjoying life are all gifts that God has given us, Jesus points us to a higher purpose.
18. What is life all about anyway? It's not just eating, drinking and being merry. Jesus points us in a different direction. Develop meaning, develop purpose beyond a me centered life. Don't be rich for yourself, be rich toward God. He says, *one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions*. Life is more than our stuff-- it's not *the one who winds up with the most toys wins*.
19. The rich man was prudent and wise. Yet God called him a fool. Why? In all his planning, in his building of barns, there was no thought of God, no provision to help others, no planning for the afterlife. It was all me, myself and I. His plans were suddenly cut short when he died.
20. Behaviorists have actually studied the effect of material wealth on people's happiness. It's interesting because they have found that after a certain point, the amount of money you make does not determine how happy you are. As long as your needs are being met, the wealthy are no happier than the rest of us.
21. When I was in grad school 35 years ago. I lived in the dorm and drove an old pickup truck. Am I happier now

because I have a barn and a house full of stuff? I don't think so.

22. The rich man forgot about God. As the hymn says, he was *rich in things, but poor in soul*. His life was not as secure as he thought. He stored up treasure for himself, but was poor toward God. He had forgotten that we are only stewards of our stuff. Naked we come into the world. Naked we leave it. Jesus said *be on your guard against greed*. Life is not about getting more and more stuff.
23. The Westminster Confession, Q1: What is the chief end of man? A1: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.
24. So instead of *eat, drink and be merry*, instead of a perpetual party, we develop meaning and purpose when we move beyond the satisfaction of our own desires and wants.
25. This is a live issue for those of us who are retired or anticipating retirement. Retirement can be a marvelous opportunity to do what we've always wanted and to make a real difference in the world. Or--it can be an empty, purposeless existence. It's what you make it.
26. As Christians we are to go through life with our hands open, making an offering of our time, our talent and our treasure. We place them on the altar and present them to the Lord as an act of worship. Instead of grabbing and trying to hold onto every morsel for ourselves, we share, we give, as we follow the example of our Lord Jesus.

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Jesus said:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if those who hear my voice open the door, I will come in to them and eat with them, and they with me.

O taste and see that the Lord is good! Happy are all who find refuge in God!

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Holy God, we praise you. Let the heavens be joyful, and the earth be glad.

We bless you for creating the whole world,
for your promises to your people Israel,
and for Jesus Christ in whom your fullness dwells.

Born of Mary, he shares our life. Eating with sinners, he welcomes us. Guiding his children, he leads us. Visiting the sick, he heals us.

Dying on the cross, he saves us.

Risen from the dead, he gives new life. Living with you, he prays for us.

Therefore we praise you,
joining our voices with choirs of angels
and with all the faithful of every time and place, who forever
sing to the glory of your name:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven
and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest.**

Remembering your gracious acts in Jesus Christ, we take from your creation this bread and this wine and joyfully celebrate his dying and rising, as we await the day of his coming. With thanksgiving, we offer our very selves to you to be a living and holy sacrifice, dedicated to your service. Great is the mystery of faith

Christ has died...

With thanksgiving we take this bread and this cup and proclaim the death and resurrection of our Lord. Receive our sacrifice of praise.

Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us that this meal may be a communion in the body and blood of our Lord.

Make us one with Christ and with all who share this feast.

Unite us in faith, encourage us with hope, inspire us to love, that we may serve as your faithful disciples until we feast at your table in glory.

We praise you, eternal God, through Christ your Word made flesh, in the holy and life-giving Spirit, now and forever.

And now, we boldly pray the prayer your Son taught us, saying

LORD'S PRAYER

The Lord Jesus, on the night of his arrest, took bread, and after giving thanks to God, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take, eat. This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way he took the cup, saying: This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me.

Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the saving death of the risen Lord, until he comes.