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Today's Word/Phrase: "the full life"

Lesson: Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23 | Luke 12:13-21

¹³Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." ¹⁴But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵And 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." ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' ¹⁸Then 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. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' ²⁰But 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?' ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

About five minutes ago, I conducted a test. I wanted to know whether we actually had paid attention to the words from our Ecclesiastes reading. There is some good news in the book of Ecclesiastes, but you definitely will not find it in this lesson. So I watched and I listened when we said, "The word of the Lord. / Thanks be to God." [The results]

In the first verse of the book, the author introduces himself as Kohelet. That isn't a name, though, but a vocation, meaning roughly "teacher" or "preacher." So the book is commonly called Kohelet, but the Greek translation of that word is Ecclesiastes, which is how most Christians in America title the book. Interestingly, for nearly the entire existence of this book, no one has been certain who the author is. Some traditions say it is King Solomon, but we know this theory is actually younger than Christianity. Some people argue that Kohelet was written before Hellenistic influence reached Israel, some people argue it was written after that. Some people even argue that it

actually has multiple authors. All of these arguments are fitting, because this centuries-long pursuit of the true authorship is “one more example of the futility of human effort.” (Roland Murphy)

“All is in vain,” the Teacher says. He has spent his entire life applying his mind [quote] “to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.” He was a philosopher, of sorts. He devoted his life to pursuing wisdom. His final verdict: All of life is chasing after the wind. He began by questioning whether pleasure is what brings about a full life. It was vanity. Perhaps then laughter results in the full life. Vanity. Wine? Vanity... it is chasing the wind. So he changed course. Maybe the full life is found in doing great works instead. Building houses, planting vineyards, and creating pools of water under the shade of trees. He toyed with all of that. It sounds pretty good, right? Vanity. Maybe then the full life is found in possessions: slaves, herds, flocks, riches, even concubines. Vanity. He even tried to see if a choir singing for him would bring his spirit into the full life. No, it too was vanity.

So now in today’s reading, Kohelet – our Teacher – tells us that he is reaching the end of his life. Everything that he has to offer his students is this: all is vanity. Yet, he says, even that snippet of wisdom is vanity, because the students are just as likely to be foolish as they are wise. Some will take from this lesson, and some won’t. Our reading ends with Kohelet asking this question: “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.” To which we say, “The word of the Lord. / Thanks be to God.”

Wow! Raise your hand if you are ready to sign up for that professor’s lecture. Yet, there is a lot of truth in what Kohelet is saying, even if it is a tough pill to swallow. There is no magic formula for the full life, even if marketers and influencers try to convince us that they have the answer. Like I said, Kohelet does eventually come around in the book to having a positive takeaway for us, which is namely this: give thanks to God, because even though life is precarious, it is still a gift. So while we have it, try to enjoy the mystery and puzzle that is life.

That reminds me of the Great Resignation that we have seen in our society since the start of the pandemic. When I’ve spoken to people who have left positions in one company to find employment elsewhere or to even try out a whole new career. Their reasoning has been about

finding a little more joy in the work they do. That thinking goes with Kohelet's teaching, because even if all life is chasing the wind, at least try to find some joy in the chase.

Our gospel lesson also provides some fodder for our discussion of the full life. It starts with someone asks Jesus to settle an inheritance dispute, to which Jesus responds, "You've got to be kidding me!" That's how I translate the Greek. It was common then to approach a rabbi to settle a dispute, hence the guy approaches Jesus. All is good there. However, when greed is at the heart of your dispute, it is best to avoid any rabbi whose biggest pet peeve is widely known to be greed.

So Jesus tells the parable of a rich man who has land that produces abundantly, and all of the Jewish listeners knew what that meant. God had told their ancestors before they entered the Promised Land that they were allowed to harvest for themselves from the centers of their fields. Whatever was growing at the edges rightfully belonged to the poor and the immigrants. Likewise, the landowners weren't allowed to go back and harvest the center of the fields a second time, because those crops that remained after the first harvest also were meant for the poor and the immigrants. So Jesus says a rich man's land produced abundantly, and what did he do with every crop on the land? He kept it for himself, choosing to build bigger barns to store it all.

This man was stealing what God said rightfully belongs to the poor and to the immigrants. Not only that, but basic economics tells us that if a product is withheld from the market and it creates scarcity, what does that do to the price of the product? It goes up. So he is stealing from the poor and likely price gouging them on top of it. If you aren't convinced that greed is the heart of the rich man, let's count together how many times he refers to himself in his three sentence monologue. "What should I (1) do, for I (2) have no place to store my (3) crops? I (4) will do this: I (5) will pull down my (6) barns and build larger ones, and there I (7) will store all my (8) grain and my (9) goods. And I (10) will say to my (11) soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" Eleven times he points to himself. Note at the end what he tells his soul to do: relax, eat, drink, be merry. Those aren't bad things. The teacher Kohelet actually instructs his students to enjoy those things in life. Relaxing, eating, drinking, and being merry are not inherently problematic. However, they are problematic when they are at the expense of other people.

If other people, especially the poor and the immigrant, have been robbed so that someone else can be merry, that's a problem.

But wait! There is a twist ending to this parable! God says to the rich man, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Note, however, what God does not say. God does not raise the more obvious question: "And the things you have prepared, what will happen to them?" Instead, it is, "Whose will they be?" God is going to see to it that the poor and the immigrants receive their fill. People's greed may temporarily get in the way, but God will make sure the people will receive what they are rightfully due.

Kohelet held the view that there is no key to the full life, so give thanks to God and seek to enjoy life. I'm not sure if Jesus would oppose that viewpoint, but he would definitely bring some clarity to it: the enjoyment of life should never be at the expense of other people. When we step back to look at Jesus' ministry, he teaches that when we give our lives for others, – lives of love, lives of service – that is when we gain life. There is no easy path to the full life; life will always be messy and it will always come with heartaches. Trying to find a life that avoids all that mess is like chasing the wind. Yet Jesus shows us a way through this: when we care for others, when we show concern, and and when we generously give of ourselves to the benefit of others, we will discover God's presence in that, and new life is revealed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.