

I.N.I.

Eleventh Sunday in Pentecost
August 20, 2017
Eccl. 1:2; 2:18-26

In Christ Jesus, who gives meaning and true joy to our lives, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

"The best thing to spend on your children is time." Children may beg for things, but what they need most is our time spent with them. Spending time with our children teaching them God's Word, saying prayers with them, speaking of Jesus and all that He has done for them, instructing them in manners and morals, showing them love and fairness, playing and working with them, being a part of their lives is far more valuable than giving them things: toys, clothes, computers, video games, etc. Our time is a very important gift to our children.

But what is the greatest thing to leave your children after you are gone, when you cannot give them of your time? Even as many parents feel giving their children everything they need and want is what life as a parent is all about, so also many parents feel that they should work and work so that they can leave large amounts of money or things as an inheritance to their children. Far greater and more valuable is to leave a legacy of Christian faith, to leave your children an example of being a loving Christian father or mother, husband or wife. In fact, the parents who have given their children everything but God's Word and instruction about Jesus as Lord and Savior have lived meaningless, empty lives. Does that sound too strong? Let's see what God's Word says.

This morning's sermon text is from the book of Ecclesiastes. I remember a newly converted member in one of my former congregations came up to me one day and said that he had been reading in the Old Testament and had gotten to Ecclesiastes. His comment was, "boy is that one sad, depressing book." And what he said is true, if you look at the book from the viewpoint of the world.

There are two main truths that Solomon is weaving together in this book. The first is this: **EVERYTHING UNDER THE SUN IS, IN AND OF ITSELF, MEANINGLESS, VANITY, EMPTINESS.** According to Solomon, life on earth is full of trouble, and even if we find pleasure, it is fleeting and soon disappears like one's breath on a winter day.

The second truth is this: **WITH GOD IN CONTROL OF OUR LIVES THEN THERE IS MEANING AND TRUE JOY TO LIFE.** From his perspective, the unbeliever, living without God, can only conclude that all is vanity, meaningless. The believer, living in Christ, sees God's hand in everything and so finds peace, contentment, joy and stability in an ever changing and turbulent world. Solomon's purpose in writing this book is to direct our hearts, minds and lives to our Lord God and His love so that we can be strengthened in our faith and in our courage to carry on in this life.

Throughout this book we are reminded that nothing on this earth can bring true lasting happiness. One man wrote, **WITHOUT THE LOVE OF GOD IN CHRIST, LIFE IS MERELY A PRELUDE TO ETERNAL DAMNATION, A RANDOM SERIES OF FLEETING TRIUMPHS AND IMPENDING TRAGEDIES CULMINATING IN THE GREATEST TRAGEDY, ETERNAL SEPARATION FROM GOD. AFTER A LIFE FILLED WITH ALL THE THINGS THE UNBELIEVERS CONSIDER THE GREATEST, SOLOMON COMMENTS FORCEFULLY ON HOW MEANINGLESS ALL THINGS WOULD BE IF THERE WERE NO MORE TO LIFE.**

We have taken the first verse of the hymn we just sang as our theme for this morning.

ALL DEPENDS ON OUR POSSESSING GOD'S ABUNDANT GRACE AND BLESSING. Do we believe that? Do we always live that? **ALL DEPENDS** on our **POSSESSING GOD'S ABUNDANT GRACE AND BLESSING.**

Our first point is: **I: YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU.**

We read vs. 18-21 **THEN I HATED ALL MY LABOR IN WHICH I HAD TOILED UNDER THE SUN, BECAUSE I MUST LEAVE IT TO THE MAN WHO WILL COME AFTER ME. AND WHO KNOWS WHETHER HE WILL BE A WISE MAN OR A FOOL? YET HE WILL RULE OVER ALL MY LABOR IN WHICH I TOILED AND IN WHICH I HAVE SHOWN MYSELF WISE UNDER THE SUN. THIS ALSO IS VANITY. THEREFORE I TURNED MY HEART AND DESPAIRED OF ALL THE LABOR IN WHICH I HAD TOILED UNDER THE**

SUN. FOR THERE IS A MAN WHOSE LABOR IS WITH WISDOM, KNOWLEDGE, AND SKILL; YET HE MUST LEAVE HIS HERITAGE TO A MAN WHO HAS NOT LABORED FOR IT. THIS ALSO IS VANITY AND A GREAT EVIL.

Solomon's first words of this book again are: **VANITY OF VANITIES, SAYS THE PREACHER; VANITY OF VANITIES, ALL IS VANITY.** The word for vanity literally means: breath or vapor. The point is that everything that is of this life is fleeting, nothing will last. Instead everything will vanish as a vapor, as our breath on a cold day. 37 times Solomon uses the word vanity, which can also be translated: meaningless, emptiness, frustration, futility, without a purpose. The Apostle James writes, **FOR WHAT IS YOUR LIFE? IT IS EVEN A VAPOR THAT APPEARS FOR A LITTLE TIME AND THEN VANISHES AWAY.**

How accurately this describes life on earth! Beneath all of the hustle and bustle, the tinsel and glitter, lies that terrible sense of emptiness. What is life all about? What is the purpose to life? It was not that way in the Garden of Eden before man fell into sin. Adam & Eve had purpose and meaning to their life. But when they fell into sin, the Apostle Paul writes, **FOR THE CREATION WAS SUBJECTED TO FUTILITY, NOT WILLINGLY, BUT BECAUSE OF HIM WHO SUBJECTED IT**--that is God. It is interesting to note that Adam and Eve named their second son, Abel, which in the Hebrew means meaningless. Perhaps this was their commentary on life after the fall.

Whatever you and I work to acquire cannot be taken beyond death. Some work to achieve wealth, others work hard to get recognition, honor, power or high position. But when we have acquired them, we must leave them to others. Death is the end of human work, but it is also the end of wealth, honor, prestige and power. **YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU!** Everyone must turn over his life's work to a new generation. **AND WHO KNOWS WHETHER HE WILL BE A WISE MAN OR A FOOL?** Sometimes the company or corporation flourishes under the son or grandson, sometimes it flops and crashes in ruins. Sometimes the next generation takes what they received in inheritance and uses it wisely, for good purposes, sometimes it is squandered, wasted and lost. Sometimes the good name of an individual is brought into disgrace by the next generation. Solomon says, **THIS ALSO IS VANITY AND A GREAT EVIL.** It is meaningless and a great evil when something that has been acquired very wisely, carefully and with much effort is recklessly wasted and lost by the next generation.

But what about the here and now? Don't all the things that we acquire at least give us peace and contentment here on earth?

Our second point says: **II: MATERIAL GOODS CAN'T EVEN GIVE YOU PEACE ON EARTH.**

We read vs. 22-23 **FOR WHAT HAS MAN FOR ALL HIS LABOR, AND FOR THE STRIVING OF HIS HEART WITH WHICH HE HAS TOILED UNDER THE SUN? FOR ALL HIS DAYS ARE SORROWFUL, AND HIS WORK GRIEVOUS; EVEN IN THE NIGHT HIS HEART TAKES NO REST. THIS ALSO IS VANITY.** In the first verses of our text Solomon spoke of the futility of pursuing and acquiring things that we must only leave behind when we die, perhaps to irresponsible fools. He now speaks of the physical and mental stress that we experience through the years while pursuing this goal of getting and possessing.

Work itself is hard. The worrying about whether all of the work and planning will be successful is hard. Back in the 1800's some people died young from physical exhaustion after too many hours of work in harsh and unhealthy conditions. Today people still have health problems and some die young, not from bad working conditions, but from stress, anxiety, worry or excessive and bad eating habits. Moses in Ps. 90 wrote **WE FINISH OUR YEARS LIKE A SIGH. THE DAYS OF OUR LIVES ARE SEVENTY YEARS; AND IF BY REASON OF STRENGTH THEY ARE EIGHTY YEARS, YET THEIR BOAST IS ONLY LABOR AND SORROW; FOR IT IS SOON CUT OFF, AND WE FLY AWAY.** All of the stress, all of the anxiety, all of the worry is as meaningless as a wisp of vapor--the hard work during the day, the restless, sleepless nights.

I ran across this insightful line: "Why put off until tomorrow what I can worry about today?" Sad to say, that's the attitude many people seem to display these days. Sometimes we worry that something won't happen—we won't get that raise or that promotion or that assignment done on time or get to see our grandchildren grow up. Sometimes we worry that something will happen—another economic collapse, a sickness, an illness or even death. Mark Twain wrote: "I have worried over a great many things in my life, the most of which have never happened."

The things we work for, worry about and accumulate cannot give us peace here on earth, no matter

how much we acquire. In fact, very often the more that is acquired, the wealthier the individual the greater the worry, anxiety, fear and insecurity.

If Solomon would have ended his words here, then this book would indeed be sad and depressing. It would be downright despairing. But there is more.

Solomon says, **III: ONLY GOD GIVES YOU PEACE AND MEANING TO LIFE.**

We read verses 24-26 **THERE IS NOTHING BETTER FOR A MAN THAN THAT HE SHOULD EAT AND DRINK, AND THAT HIS SOUL SHOULD ENJOY GOOD IN HIS LABOR. THIS ALSO, I SAW, WAS FROM THE HAND OF GOD. FOR WHO CAN EAT, OR WHO CAN HAVE ENJOYMENT MORE THAN I? FOR GOD GIVES WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE AND JOY TO A MAN WHO IS GOOD IN HIS SIGHT; BUT TO THE SINNER HE GIVES THE WORK OF GATHERING AND COLLECTING, THAT HE MAY GIVE TO HIM WHO IS GOOD BEFORE GOD. THIS ALSO IS VANITY AND GRASPING FOR THE WIND.**

What is the difference between the words of the rich fool in our scripture reading and Solomon's words here in our sermon text? The rich fool said, **I WILL DO THIS: I WILL PULL DOWN MY BARN AND BUILD GREATER, AND THERE I WILL STORE ALL MY CROPS AND MY GOODS. AND I WILL SAY TO MY SOUL, SOUL, YOU HAVE MANY GOODS LAID UP FOR MANY YEARS; TAKE YOUR EASE; EAT, DRINK, AND BE MERRY.** Sounds like his soul was enjoying good in his labor.

The difference lay in the heart. The rich fool did not acknowledge or thank God as the provider of His goods, he did not share any of his goods with others less fortunate, and he planned his future without any thought of God's purposes or will. Solomon says, **THIS ALSO, I SAW, WAS FROM THE HAND OF GOD.** Contentment with what we have and enjoying what we have worked for and acquired is in the hands of God. Solomon in the 127th Psalm writes, **UNLESS THE LORD BUILD THE HOUSE, THEY LABOR IN VAIN WHO BUILD IT; UNLESS THE LORD GUARDS THE CITY, THE WATCHMAN STAYS AWAKE IN VAIN. IT IS VAIN FOR YOU TO RISE UP EARLY, TO SIT UP LATE, TO EAT THE BREAD OF SORROWS; FOR SO HE GIVES HIS BELOVED SLEEP.**

Here the Gospel and faith enters the picture. God tells us that His love for us goes beyond just giving us enjoyment and satisfaction in our work. Our greatest accomplishment here on earth is not worth comparing to what Jesus has done for us. His perfect life for us fills us with true joy and contentment in everything we do. Only by seeing Christ can we see the emptiness and vanity of the things of this life and not despair, for we know that we have much, much more. Solomon says, **FOR GOD GIVES WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE AND JOY TO A MAN WHO IS GOOD IN HIS SIGHT.** Who is that--**GOOD IN HIS SIGHT?** That is none other than a believer in Jesus Christ. In Hebrews we are told, **WITHOUT FAITH IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO PLEASE GOD.**

The wisdom and knowledge that we have is that Jesus has come to redeem us from a sinful, empty, meaningless life. He saved us from a slavery to things and the work and worry of this life. He made our lives worthwhile by living and dying for us. As we read in our first Scripture reading from Colossians, Christ is our life, He gives purpose and meaning to our lives. Therefore since we were raised up with Christ we are to **SEEK THOSE THINGS WHICH ARE ABOVE, SET OUR MINDS ON THINGS ABOVE, NOT ON THINGS ON THE EARTH.** There is no meaningless work for one who can serve Christ. All of our faithful labor is then a thank offering to God that shall last on into eternity. As the poem says, **ONE LIFE TO LIVE, TWILL SOON BE PAST, ONLY WHAT'S DONE FOR CHRIST SHALL LAST.**

Since we Christians know we will pass from this life into unimaginable riches, enjoyment and peace in heaven, we have no need to fret or worry about what we leave behind or to whom we leave it. We need not wear ourselves out in trying to accumulate more and more for ourselves and our families, but we will be content with what we have and know that our real peace and joy is found in believing in Christ as Lord and Savior, being His child and an heir of everlasting life in heaven.

Our text began with the words, **VANITY OF VANITIES, ALL IS VANITY.** It ends with the application of that strong message to those who do not believe in Jesus. For them their life is vain and meaningless and ends in eternal death. But the believer in Christ not only has a meaningful life of service and praise to God and loving service to his fellow man here on earth, but an everlasting life of

glory and joy to look forward to in heaven.

Solomon is saying **SAVE YOURSELF THE TROUBLE!** You can learn the hard way like I did. For Solomon had it all, riches, fame, wisdom, fortune, wealth beyond compare and he fell away from the LORD and all that he had gave him no true peace.

Or **WE CAN TAKE HIS WORD FOR IT.** He was brought back by the Spirit to once again know His Savior and the promise of his salvation. The inspired word of the Holy Spirit says this world and its material goods offers nothing but worry and anxiety, the Lord Jesus gives happiness, contentment and everlasting peace. Which will you choose?

Amen.