

Sunday, August 4, 2019  
 Lectionary 18, Year C  
 8th Sunday after Pentecost

**Vanity of Vanities**

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

*Delivered to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church  
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*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable  
 in your sight o God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

*Amen*

*Grace and peace to you from God who was, and God who is, and God who  
 will be forever.*

*Amen*

“Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,  
 vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher...everything is utterly meaningless.

The Wisdom of Ecclesiastes...reads as poetically as Shakespear at times...and almost as  
 dismal...vanities of vanities says the teacher...with what shall I fill the voids in my life...all my work is  
 meaningless as I have to leave it behind for others...perhaps even the fools...says the teacher.

The depth of despair here can be felt by the teacher, almost as deeply as it can be felt by Hamlet in  
 Act 3 when he struggles to deal with the death of his father...contemplating his own  
 mortality...thinking if it might be worth ending...

“To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
 And by opposing end them.”

To suffer the voids in our lives - or to die?

To toil under the sun when we know our days are numbered - and to leave those toils to those who remain...even if they are fools.

Yet, the teacher softens his view a little in the two passages following today's reading, he says:

“There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; 25 for apart from him[a] who can eat or who can have enjoyment? 26 For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after the wind.”

Our author is still trying to find meaning in his work and wealth and pleasure...and it has created this void of nothingness that seems to consume him...let's just live life the best we can until death has the final say...Hamlet does not kill himself ultimately because of the fear of what lies beyond...the undiscovered country he calls it...he determines to live life in the pain and sorrow and wait for death to come to him...

And what can be worse than a life of just waiting in this void of nothingness...so we find ourselves trying to fill it up.

In 1979, Jimmy Carter gave a speech titled *Crisis of Confidence* where he happened to hit on this topic when he said:

“Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.”

But 40 years later we find ourselves filling this emptiness and void with stuff...lots and lots of stuff...until death has its way and our stuff ends up in an estate sale or the garbage dump...all our work was meaningless...vanities of vanities...

But that stuff never really helps us to identify or locate that meaning we are so desperately looking for...until we listen to the words of Paul's letter to the Colossians:

“Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, <sup>3</sup>for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup>When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.”

Earthly consumption and accumulation to fill the voids and to stop the stings of pain and suffering can never fill our lives - only Christ can do that. Only Christ can fill the chasm and void and the good news is this:

Live your lives in joy as the teacher suggests but hold the hope of the resurrection in Christ Jesus - a hope that will fill all the voids and bind all the wounds - a hope to set our eyes beyond this world and into the next.

Hamlet does not speak of this hope - the teacher does not yet understand it - but through Christ, we know we do not hope in vain - for in Christ there truly are no vanities of vanities...nothing is meaningless in Christ Jesus.