

“How much is enough?”

August 5, 2007

Text: Ecclesiastes 2:1-11, Luke 12:13-21

I.

In the world of professional sports, all the time, we hear reports like the following:

- The player is in a great situation on a competitive team ... prospects for the future look good ...
- But he's decided become a free agent to *test the waters*, so to speak, to see how much he's worth.
- Sure enough, another team offers him sixty million for five years.
- The team he's on (where he's very happy and has excellent prospects) can't quite meet that price, offering *only* fifty million for five years.
- Sure enough, the player takes the bigger offer; and the reason is, *I gotta take care of my family*. Or, *I gotta look out for my future*.

How much is enough?

Or in the wider business world, an employee gets lured away from what has been a great situation ... the income is excellent ... the working situation, excellent. The family is happy. But a rival company puts more money on the table and—boom—in an instant, the employee accepts the offer and is gone.

How much is enough?

II.

How much income do we need to feel secure? How much protection do we need to feel safe? How many back-up plans do we need to feel prepared and organized?

We're a restless and anxious people aren't we?

Some once asked John D. Rockefeller, *How much wealth does it take to satisfy a person?*

Just a little more, was his reply, *just a little more*.

Isn't it the truth? Do we ever feel we have enough? Enough to retire? Enough to settle in to a less hectic life style? Enough to take the vacation we both deserve and need (You know, Europeans typically get six weeks of vacation a year!!)?

How much is enough?

III.

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes is one of the *maverick* books of the Bible, along with Songs of Songs and perhaps the book of Revelation in the Christian scriptures.

Personally, I love Ecclesiastes. It's like existential reflection and philosophy. It's the musings of this *obviously* older man who had done it all and seen it all and who, now, in his twilight years, is soberly looking back, trying to sort it all out ... trying to make sense of things. We don't know who authored the book. Let's just call him *Ecclesiastes*.

Ecclesiastes was anxious about his life. He was afraid to die before he learned how to live. With the end of his life nearing, he was face to face with the stark realization that his life lacked meaning ... that he hadn't fulfilled what he was supposed to fulfill ... that something was missing.

In our reading this morning, Ecclesiastes is reflective, but with tinges of melancholy and regret sprinkled throughout.

I made great works ... built houses, planted vineyards ... I made myself gardens and parks. I also had great possessions of herds of flocks, more than anyone in Jerusalem. I had silver and gold and the treasures of a king.

I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. I kept my heart from no pleasure.

*Then I considered all that I had done and all the achievements of my labors ... and again, all was vanity and a **chasing after the wind** ... and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.*

IV.

Ecclesiastes is a great book, burgeoning with wisdom for contemporary American culture. In the meshing of our secular culture and religious culture, there's the contrast of *the good life* and **the blessed life**.

The challenge of the sermon experience this morning is that it helps us sort out our values in all of this. Whatever *the good life* is, in American culture, invariably it gets all tied up with upward mobility and affluence ... and with the *restless acquisitiveness* that the media and the world of advertising suggest to us.

When we say about a person, *he's got it made*, or *she's got the good life*, or *wow, they've sure got it all, don't they?* what we mean is basically two things:

1. they've got all the income they need to do whatever they want to do, and ...

2. whatever their work is, if they work at all, it's on their terms.

What Ecclesiastes suggests to us is that *the good life* is over-rated; and that at the end of the day, *the good life* leaves us limp and empty of meaning. *Again, all was vanity and a chasing after the wind.*

V.

The problem with the rich fool in the parable is that he's on the wrong track. He doesn't *get it*. He lacks spiritual depth and awareness. He's naïve in every way; he's totally self-absorbed and self focused; he doesn't see the big picture of his life.

How much is enough? Where does it all end?

What he needs is to meet Ecclesiastes and appeal to him to become his mentor, his spiritual guide.

As Jesus concludes in the parable, *So it is for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.*

Wow, that's a mouth full.

The Parable and Ecclesiastes compel us to take a look at our lives and to not be afraid to tell the truth about ourselves.

1. Are we an anxious people?
2. Are we too full of worries about tomorrow?
3. Are we restless about maintaining and keeping our head above water?
4. Are we satisfied with our lives?
5. Do we worry too much about having enough ... and being safe enough and secure enough.

What we come to realize—and what our Christian faith calls us to—is the awareness that what our spirit longs for is, not *the good life* at all, but **the blessed life**. Being *rich toward God*, is to live **the blessed life**. That's the message and the invitation of the parable.

1. **The blessed life** is not about materialism and possessions and the world of upward mobility and long-term financial security.
2. It's not about a life free of burden and sacrifice.

The blessed life is a life of generosity and compassion. It's a life of deep relationships and commitment to the value of community. It's a life of sensitivity to the inequities that surround us. It's a life of love and selflessness.

VI.

In the parable, the rich man is a fool because his life is only focused on himself. At the end of the day, he's consumed by greed and his illusion of *the good life*. But it's all about him. There's no room for anybody else.

On the other hand, over time, Ecclesiastes has learned that this path leads to nowhere ... to a *chasing after the wind*.

Are we chasing, friends? And if so, what are we chasing after? If we're chasing, let the chase be over. And let **the blessed life** be born in us each one ...

Hasidism is a form of Jewish mysticism. There's an Hasidic tale about a man who is walking in the forest and becomes lost. He wanders around for hours trying to find his way out, trying one path after another. Suddenly, he comes upon another hiker walking through the forest.

Thank God, he cries out, another human being. Can you show me the way back to town?

The other man replies, *No, I'm lost myself. But we can help each other and together, eventually we'll find the path that leads out.*

Many religious sages suggest that God put us on this planet for essentially two purposes: *to learn and to love*. They're both important; but love is the big one. Going the second mile. Deepening the bonds that unite us. Approaching each day with a humble and grateful spirit. Honoring life with our kindness, generosity, forgiveness and compassion.

When all is said and done, the Spirit does not call us to *build bigger barns*; the Spirit calls us to lives of *greater richness toward God* that **the blessed life** will be ours.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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