

Luke 12:13-21
Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:18-26
Colossians 3:1-11
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (C)
1 August 2010

“Does Your Life Feel Meaningless?”

I. One of the tasks of ministry I have enjoyed most is the sessions I get to have with couples before they get married. It’s fun to see the couples talk and share. And it’s a great opportunity to talk about how the Lord wants to be the third member of our marriages.

As part of the sessions, I use what’s called a Marriage Inventory which has all kinds of interesting questions the couple thinks about ahead of time and then discusses with each other and me when we get together. There are questions about what they learned from their parents' relationship. They talk about where they will spend Thanksgiving and Christmas, and how they can work with the expectations of both families. They even get to discuss who will do the dishes and clean the toilet!

But along with those pretty easy questions are some really big ones like: “What is love?” and “What is marriage?” A lot of times, when they first read these, the couple looks at me and says something like, “Wow, I don’t think I’ve really thought about those before!” But probably the one that blows their mind the most is the one that asks, “In a brief paragraph, please share what is your purpose for living . . .”

As we talk about the purpose of life, we also take some time to discuss their priorities for spending the financial resources God entrusts to them. Sometimes the husband-to-be thinks he would like to buy something like a Corvette, or the woman has a time-share in the Caribbean as one of her long-term goals. But, I’m glad to report that many times I hear some more down-to-earth kind of goals, like having enough to be able to put a roof over their heads and food on the table. One time one of them even said that

supporting the work of the church and charities was among their top priorities.

II. In the parable of the rich farmer today, we heard our Lord describe a man who had very different priorities. He reminds me of a young man I know who, when I asked what he wanted in life, said to me: “I want it all!” When I asked what that meant, he began talking about all the things he wanted for his car. “I want \$4,000 gold-plated hubcaps, and *six* T.V.’s”—I’m not joshing you, he really wanted six T.V.s!

I doubt if the rich farmer would have been satisfied with one or two, either. He was constantly expanding his business horizons, even though evidently he had everything he needed already. His plan was eventually to be able to sit back, take early retirement, and “*eat, drink and be merry.*” But, at the heart of it, what made this man a “fool” was that he never saw beyond himself and his wants. As one commentator, William Barclay, has observed: “There’s no parable like this one which is so full of the words, ‘I, me, my and mine.’”

Barclay then goes on to illustrate with a story about a schoolboy in English class. At one point the boy’s teacher asks him to tell the class what part of speech ‘my’ and ‘mine’ are. If you remember your grammar lessons: ‘my’ and ‘mine’ are known as “possessive pronouns”. But the boy’s answer to the teacher was “Yes, teacher, I know. ‘My’ and ‘mine’ are “*aggressive pronouns*”.

The Rich Fool was aggressively self-centered, aggressive in what he wanted. His main purpose in life was how he could make money and get ahead. He didn’t think about the needs of any one else. He didn’t make time to think about his relationship to the Lord or to pay attention to his spiritual welfare. But, I’ll bet, no matter how many barns he built, he never would think he had built enough. If he thought himself a believer, I suspect he figured God owed it to him. And, if he didn’t get what he wanted, I’m sure God would have been one of the first to hear about it!

Russian author, Leo Tolstoy, once wrote a short-story about a successful peasant farmer who, like the Rich Fool, wanted more of everything. One day he received an intriguing offer from the Tsar. For 1000 rubles, he could buy all the land he could walk around in a single day. The only catch was that he had to be back at his starting point by sundown.

Early the next morning he started out at a fast pace. By noon he was getting very tired, but he kept going, covering more and more ground. Well into the afternoon he realized his greed had taken him far away from his starting point. As the sun began to set, he started to run, knowing that if he didn't make it back by sundown he would lose his chance to become a bigger landholder than he had ever imagined. With the sun beginning to sink below the horizon, he came within sight of the finish line. Gasping for breath, his heart pounding, he called upon every bit of strength left in his body and staggered across the line just before the sun disappeared.

Actually he didn't cross the line as much as he collapsed across it, blood streaming from his mouth. In a few minutes he was dead, leaving his shocked servants to dig him a grave—a plot of ground that wasn't much over six feet long and three feet wide. Can you guess the title of Tolstoy's story? “How Much Land Does a Man Need?”

How much do we really need? How much do we need beyond something to eat and drink and to have a loving relationship with our Lord? No matter how much wealth we gather in, we can't take any of it with us, can we? “*For we brought nothing into the world, and we can't take anything out of world,*” St. Paul wrote Timothy (1 Timothy 6:7). “*One's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions,*” Jesus said of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:15).

Remember what the Teacher wrote in the lesson from Ecclesiastes? “I must leave it to the man who comes after me, and who knows whether he will be a wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity” (2:18-19). “Emptiness” and “meaningless”-ness are the

ways other translations put it. A “*striving*” or “*chasing after the wind*.”

If all we do is live for our house, for our yard, for our retirement, for our health, that’s how much we’ll have left in the end. A handful of wind. A six-foot-by-three hole in the ground.

III. But when we are “*rich toward God*,” as the Lord tried to explain by this parable to the man who was so worried about getting his part of the inheritance, our life doesn’t consist in the abundance of our possessions. After thinking about the meaningless of earthly wealth and possessions, the writer of Ecclesiastes wrote: “*There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from Him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?*” (2:24-25).

The truly wise person doesn’t get stuck in the muck of decaying things. He sets his heart on “*things that are above*” as Paul counsels us in Colossians; he sets his sights on Jesus, the One “*who lives and reigns with the Father and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever*” (Colossians 3:2). Earthly things will all pass away, but our Lord Jesus and His Word will never pass away (Matthew 24:35). “*He’s the same, yesterday, today and forever*” (Hebrews 13:8).

When He is the focus of our lives, as Paul reminds us in Colossians, our lives are “*hidden with Christ in God*” (Colossians 3:3)—“*hidden*” in the sense of being invisible to the earthly eye, yes. But more so, “*hidden*” in the sense of being “*tucked away*” for safe-keeping in Christ seated “*at the right hand of God*,” where Jesus says “*neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal*” (Matthew 6:20). Those true treasures tucked safely in Christ—His love, His forgiveness, His eternal commitment through His cross-shed blood, His peace, His joy—are “*an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading*” according to St. Peter—a divine treasure “*kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a*

salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1:4-5).

That’s the purpose for living Paul was describing when he said, “*Set your minds on things that are above.*” That’s the kind of life-goal he urged young pastor Timothy to encourage among his members: “*As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life*” (1 Timothy 6:17-19). To “*take hold of that which is truly life*”—how’s that for a personal mission statement?

Let me tell you the story about a couple Julie and I got to know a few years ago. Not many months before that time, they had received a call from a lady in St. Catharines, who had been a friend of the wife’s family for more than 30 years. They called her “Aunt” Ethel, even though she wasn’t a blood relative. Ethel was a fairly healthy 91-year-old, who was beginning to experience occasional signs of dementia.

What Ethel called them to say was that she was moving in with them—not to ask if she *could* move in with them, but to say she *was* moving in with them. What’s amazing is that this couple decided to go along with the idea, because they knew they were the only people in the world who cared anything about Ethel. Ethel had no family and few friends. She was living alone in a crumbling old flat, with stuff piled waist-high, leaving only a couple of pathways through the apartment. So, this couple set to work, building a room for Ethel in their basement, a private spot where an eccentric lady could live out her last days with some privacy and peace, and yet have people who cared about her just a flight of stairs away.

But when Ethel arrived she told our friends, “I can’t live here. I’ll take Megan’s room.” Megan is their only daughter. So did they quickly drop her off at the nearest nursing home, like I probably would have thought to do? No, they quietly moved Megan into their room, and moved themselves out to their trailer, until they

could figure out what to do on a more permanent basis.

But that wasn't the end of the story. The wife told us that, since Ethel couldn't be left alone, she would give up her job for a time (working in a nursing home, by the way), and devote herself to caring for the woman she called "aunt." But, not just Ethel, but also her mom who was very sick with leukemia.

You see, not a year before, the wife told me, she had buried her father. She had had opportunity to spend a fair amount of time with him before he died, but she wished she had had more. "I realized," she said to me, "that earning a nice salary really wasn't worth it. I'll have a chance to work again, but I only have my parents once, and Ethel and my mom need me now." She explained how she and her husband had decided to use some of her RSPs to make up the shortfall in their income since, "After all, God knows if I'll ever get to use them later." "I'm kind of exhausted right now," she went on to say, "But I think this is what the Lord wants me to do with my life right now, and I'm happy to do it."

I don't share this to try to make you feel guilty if you weren't or don't feel able to care for your elderly relatives or friends in the same way this couple decided to do. I share it as an illustration of what fulfillment and joy a life devoted to things other than money and possessions can bring. I know that some of you have made similar sacrifices in your life. And, if you have, I hope you have because that is what you have believed the Lord has called and led you to do.

The Foolish Farmer died rich in possessions, but was bankrupt as far as his relationship with God and others was concerned. It was only when the Teacher of Ecclesiastes realized that apart from the Lord he could have no real or lasting joy, that he began to see that a life lived with both eyes on the Lord of heaven was one which wouldn't end meaninglessly at the grave.

As the poem the pastor in the church where I grew up used to like to quote: "Only one life 'twill soon be past; Only what's done for Christ will last." Or as St. John was commanded by a voice in

heaven to record in his Revelation: “*Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Blessed indeed’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them’*” (Revelation 14:13).

Yes, when your life is set on things above, where your Saviour waits to welcome you at the close of your life, then you will be able, as the Teacher says, to find satisfaction in your work, enjoy your food, and have fun and fulfillment in putting to work the wisdom, gifts and talents the Lord has entrusted to you. Whether that calling is caring for those in need, raising a family, working at a job, or sitting in a wheelchair praying for others, tucked safely in Christ, it is a meaningful life that brings glory to God. Then it won’t be like a chasing after the wind. Then it will be a life full of meaningful purpose that will last long after everything in this present world has given way to the new heaven and earth, when Christ, who is our life, appears and takes us with Him into His everlasting glory.

+ + +

Preached by

Pastor Mark Hartburg

at

Historic St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
137 Queen St. S., Kitchener, Ontario
519-745-4891

Listen to the sermons at www.historicstpauls.ca

Together Lifting High the Cross of Jesus
for 175 years
1835-2010