

8.3.2025 Pentecost 8

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

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

“Set your minds on things above”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

This may sound like a strange question, but what does your “ultimate retirement plan” look like? Where do you see yourself in a thousand years? Today’s readings are an ultimate reality check, reminding us that our lives are very brief and very fleeting. As the Teacher in Ecclesiastes says, “*I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.*” Today’s readings remind us in very stark terms that we will all die. As the psalm for today (Psalm 49:11) reads, “*Their graves are their homes for ever, their dwelling places to all generations, though they named lands after themselves.*”

Not only will we each die, the great, the proud, the powerful, all we have possessed and worked for will also go into the hands of others. Today’s readings are an ultimate reality check reminding us that one day, the earth and everything under the sun will go on without us. “*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*”

The English word “vanity” of course means someone who is conceited or proud, someone who has an overly high opinion of themselves. However, the Hebrew word, *habal*, that we translate as “vanity,” means “empty, fleeting, and futile.” *All is vanity* means “all is fleeting, empty, and futile.” The Teacher of Ecclesiastes wants us to know that one day, we will have to leave all we have worked for, all our possessions behind – and others will take possession of them. Will they be wise or foolish? These are ultimate questions, questions that we don’t always want to think or talk about. It’s like people who don’t want to plan their funeral, thinking that day will never come.

There’s a whole industry surrounding us that handles the transferring of what we leave behind. Expensive collections of artwork, once the pride of well-heeled collectors, now reside in museums. Auction houses regularly break up collections and sell off treasures that people have spent a lifetime amassing – they all go into new hands. Homes that have been thoughtfully built, lovingly cared for and lived in are torn down and new homes built, or the land used in a new way – *and vanity of vanities*, several years later, no one will remember who lived on that piece of land.

We work hard using our skills, talents and wisdom – often making a difference in our family, community, and world yet in the matter of two or three decades, no one will remember us or our work. Who among us has not looked at old photos of family ancestors, not knowing their names, their struggles, their stories – all that they did so that we could be here. *Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.* And one day, life will also move on without us.

Today’s readings may seem uncompromisingly bleak, but I think the right word is realistic. You

see, as children of the post-Enlightenment worldview, modern people often believe more in progress than they do in God. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in 1944, describing the paradox of being modern: “Before God and with God we live without God.” We believe that with enough time and money, we will overcome the confines of time and space – believing that we will live longer and longer, solve the mysteries of life – all while not understanding life’s deepest mystery: that our lives are finite and limited.

The central creed of Modernity, of science and technology, has been an overwhelming faith in progress, faith in humankind. We tell ourselves human beings are free and autonomous individuals who are *absolutely free* to live and shape the world as we would like. René Descartes wrote, “*Cogito, ergo sum*,” (I think therefore I am), and while this is most certainly true, one day, I will cease to think and therefore the I of “I am” will no longer be. It’s like a photo I have seen of a well-tended cemetery with moss-covered headstones, surrounded by trees with colorful autumn leaves, with a caption reading, “Did you think it would end any other way?”

We may think we have time on our side – that there will be time to organize our lives, put our affairs in order, make right what we have done or gotten wrong. The parable Jesus tells in today’s gospel reminds us how little time we really have.

Asked to be the arbitrator in a family dispute over an inheritance, Jesus said, “*Be on guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.*” Ecclesiastes and today’s psalm also drill this point home: “*The wise and the fool perish together and leave their wealth to others*” (Psalm 49:10). How will your possessions be used after you die?

To make this point, Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool. The “ultimate retirement plan” of the rich fool consisted in building large barns to store grain and goods so that for years to come he could “*eat, drink and be merry.*” Yet 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?*” Jesus says, “*So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.*” The moral of Jesus’ parable is that each of us, will have to answer for the way we have conducted our lives, used our wealth, and treated others. It never occurred to the rich fool that his wealth would not protect him from the wrath of death.

If we are honest, most of us probably have far more than we need. In modern terms, those large barns of the rich fool sound like our modern investment funds in which we silo our wealth, waiting for future days of leisure. We have homes crammed with possessions, perhaps even collections of artwork, antiques, jewelry, and other valuables. We may rent storage lockers for the overflow as if we’re planning on taking it with us into the afterlife. I’ve heard the story of Pastor Bob Stackel who would preach from this pulpit saying, “You know, one thing you’ll never see is a U-Haul trailer

behind a hearse.” A friend of mine says it this way, talking about “the weightiness of possessions,” describing the time, effort, and stress possessions cause, as we worry about them, hauling them around house to house, city to city, even country to country over a lifetime.

Paul’s letter to the Colossians is a counterpoint to the fleeting emptiness of wealth. St. Paul writes, “*So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is.*” Paul puts our constant chasing after wealth in perspective, encouraging us to set our minds on things above, not on the things of earth. In essence, Paul is saying, “Remember that in baptism you have already died and been raised with Christ – your life is already hidden in Christ – there is nothing to fear. Baptized, you have been clothed with Christ, forgiven and made a new person. Nothing, not even death, can separate you from God’s love in Jesus Christ.

At the beginning of the today’s sermon, I asked, “What is your ultimate retirement plan?” To be in Christ is to know why you are living and where you will spend eternity – “*with Christ in glory.*”

Most of the time we live in the penultimate things of daily life, our worries and fears, our separations and divisions, our hatreds and prejudices. The good news is we really can set our minds and lives upon the things above. We really can, as Paul writes, see “*Christ is all and in all.*” Paul describes what Christ looks like in all people, writing, “*there is no longer Greek and Jew...enslaved and free, but Christ is all and in all!*” We might update this saying, “there is no longer Black and White, Asian and Hispanic, foreigner and stranger, rich and poor, gay and straight, but Christ is all and in all!” Amid our diversity as people, to be in Christ is to know an unbreakable unity.

There is only one way out of this life. Where do you see yourself in a thousand years? Grasp hold of faith in Christ. Make him the center of your life and you will see him in all things and in all people. Raised with him in baptism, live with him for your neighbor. Use your wealth not only for yourself but for others.

Life is not about what you own or possess, it is about Christ at the center. It is much more important to be than to have. Be in Christ. Set your mind on things above.

Live with him now, and you will live with him forever. Amen.