

Finding Meaning

If one looks at today's readings apart from the books from which they were taken, one could easily get a sense of despair. The reading from Ecclesiastes paints a picture where nothing in life matters. Some Bible translations use the word 'meaningless' in place of 'vanities.' It recognizes that once a person dies, then whatever they had accomplished, whatever they had amassed, whatever they had learned will be passed on to those who take over after their death. In short, the author recognizes that once you are dead, you can't take it with you and there has never been a U-Haul trailer towed by a hearse that was going to the cemetery. You have no control over what people who get your 'stuff' do with it once you are gone. The verses from Psalm 49 echo these same sentiments of despair. In addition to the feeling of despair from these readings, one also denotes the authors' recognition of the finitude of life, that all life here on earth ends at some point. In short, the authors of these texts are looking for meaning in their lives, asking what does their life mean and from where do we derive this meaning.

It is when we look at the rest of the Book of Ecclesiastes and Psalm 49 do we hear an answer to these queries of finding meaning. You see, when we place our trust in something that had been created, we need to remember that like us, anything that is created has a finite life to it. Something that has been created is only temporary. The authors of Ecclesiastes and the Psalm recognize this temporary condition of things and wonder if there is more to life than what we see.

When we put our trust, our faith, into something that is permanent, then we will be able to find meaning in our lives. It is then when we will be able to see that we are a part of a much bigger picture. One may think that something the size of the universe would not miss one little piece of the picture that an individual would represent, but that would be falling into the trap that the rich man in Jesus' parable

succumbed. That trap is seeing ourselves as an individual with no connections to others.

Notice the words that Jesus used in telling the parable. It virtually is a one-man skit with no one else around. The rich man is thinking, talking to himself. Everything is his - his grain, his barns, his goods. All his talk is in the first person, telling himself what he will do. All the action is his, he will tear down the barns, he will build bigger ones, he will store everything in them. In the end, he gives himself permission to take it easy, to enjoy all the abundance that is his. This rich man is not in any kind of relationship with anyone else. He does not share his abundance with anyone, he does not recognize that he needs others to build the bigger barns and even to build the first ones and it was others that worked so that there was an abundant harvest to begin with. Jesus subtly indicates that the man did little to no work in getting the crop that he had. Jesus said that the land of the rich man produced abundantly.

The rich man represents someone who lives selfishly, who is self-centered. Everything revolves around them; everything is for their own benefit. They are very possessive of 'their things' and even consider other people's things only as something that they have not gotten yet. Today, he may even be called a self-made man, indicating that whatever they have achieved, they did it on their own. However, when we look closer at these 'self-made' people, we see that there were others who helped them along the way; that there were others involved in the success of that individual. Society tends to put these self-made people on a pedestal as examples of what a person can achieve through hard work and succeeding against the odds.

We need to be careful in interpreting this parable from Jesus. We must not read too much into it, making it a parable against one economic system and endorsing another one. Also, we must not jump to the conclusion that because the rich man was

going to die that night that God was punishing him for his actions. By paying close attention to the words that are used in the text, we can see that Jesus is taking an approach to life similar to the Ecclesiastes and Psalm texts. That the only certain thing in life is death and to find meaning in life one must turn to something that has not been created, something that is permanent.

So, where do we find meaning in life? What gives us a sense that there is something more to life than what we experience? What keeps us from getting into a vicious cycle that George Carlin highlighted in his riff about 'stuff'? Carlin had observed that people are about getting stuff, whatever that may be, and we need to store our stuff. When we run out of space for our stuff, we get a bigger house to store our stuff and so that we can get more stuff. What breaks this cycle for us?

As Christians, it is through our baptism in Jesus that breaks this cycle. It is in our baptism where a relationship with God through Jesus is established. This relationship is not a temporary one. Because of the sacrifice that Jesus made, death has been transformed into a threshold to eternal life with God. It is in baptism where the Holy Spirit gives us gifts so that we may overcome those selfish desires that Paul points out in his letter to the Colossians in the third chapter where he points out the behaviors which we are to avoid. This relationship that God establishes with us at our baptism is one that is inclusive to all who believe in Jesus, it does not exclude anyone.

In a typical fashion for Jesus, He puts a twist on the ending, changing what we anticipate He will say. When He compares those who store up treasures for themselves, we anticipate Him saying about storing up treasures for God, or even in heaven to be consistent with the Gospel reading from a couple of weeks ago. However, Jesus says about being 'rich toward God.'

How can we be 'rich toward God?' In the first part of the verse, people are the 'owners' of the treasure and doing the storing up of them. However, in the second

part, I think, that God is the 'owner' of the treasure, which actually is us. So, we are rich toward God by becoming God's treasure; of surrendering our whole self to God, not holding back anything, relying on God for everything. This doesn't mean we just sit back and wait for things to happen to us, for blessings to just come our way. We are to use the gifts that God has blessed us with and use them for God's glory, not our benefit at the expense of others. In other words, we are rich toward God when God actually is our number one priority. It is in having a right priority of God first that the rest of our relationships will flow. It is being rich toward God when we reflect that love that God has for us to others, especially those who need to know of God's love for them. It is having that ultimate trust in God, that through Jesus we are given what we need to live, both here on earth and for all eternity with God. It is this trust in God, begun at our baptism that gives meaning to our lives. May we always remember that and have the kinds of relationships with God and with others that reflect the light of God's love for us to a world that can seem to be dark and cold.

In just a short while, Calvin, Cameron and Charli will be brought into this relationship with God through Jesus by the sacrament of Baptism. I pray that they will be given the gifts they need to know of this love that God has for them and be willing to be led by the Holy Spirit to reflect that love to the world, finding meaning for their lives.

YouTube links

Gospel and Sermon: https://youtu.be/tOzpWS8_-eA

Service: <https://youtu.be/dybqIQwYvKw>