### “Vanity of Vanities” Steve Finlan for The First Church, July 31, 2022

**Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:18–21**

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

18 I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me 19—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. 20So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, 21because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.

**Luke 12:13–21**

13Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” 14But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” 15And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” 16Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” 18Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” 20But 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?” 21So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.”

There’s quite a bit of futility in these two passages. Ecclesiastes is famous for its “vanity of vanities” sayings, but it’s really attacking futility as well as vanity. It’s also important to know what kind of theology Ecclesiastes is rejecting. There was a common view in ancient Israel, reflected in many of the Proverbs, that righteousness is always rewarded with wealth and peace. This naïve and overly conservative theology, sometimes called Providential theology, tends to work for the rich and powerful, but it is deeply unsatisfying to many other people, and Ecclesiastes is a systematic attack on that kind of belief. Of course, it goes too far in the other direction, making it sound like everything is futile and there’s no reward at all. Isn’t that always the case with ideas? Somebody doesn’t like one view, so they swing to the opposite extreme. It happens in philosophy just as in politics. To unseat a certain viewpoint, they state and then overstate an opposite viewpoint.

Ecclesiastes is not all gloom, however. When you get toward the end of the book, you find some more satisfying passages, such as “cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days” (11:1 RSV). It’s mysterious, but interesting. I think it might refer to being generous, for you’ll get generosity in return. Then there’s the statement in the last chapter: “the breath returns to God who gave it” (12:7), or “the spirit returns to God who gave it,” as the RSV renders it (see NASB, NIV The Message, NLT, too). The Hebrew word *ruach* can be translated as either “breath” or “spirit.” I think in this case, since it is speaking of what happens at death, “spirit” is probably more appropriate. The book finishes with this: “God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (12:14). There is some comfort in that, in being judged by a fair judge. Some there are who do evil things in secret. Proverbs 12:20 warns “Deceit is in the mind of those who plan evil.” Others do good without claiming any credit for it.

Now, the message of this week’s excerpt is fairly dour, saying that you don’t know if your heirs are going to be responsible stewards of your wealth. The author despairingly concludes that his heirs will be foolish. In any case, his treasure will be out of his hands, and he groans about that. His attitude is a bit funny; he’s so consistently glum, and so determined to reject the providential theology. Have you ever had a friend who’s always negative, always thinking the government’s out to get him? That’s this guy.

Maybe the main character in Jesus’ parable is the same in some ways. Not trusting his heirs, he wants to revel in his possessions while he’s alive, but in the end he will die and he can’t take it with him. There’s no point in storing up material treasures for yourself; it will all trickle from your hands in an instant. Don’t be attached to it. Elsewhere, Jesus exhorts his disciples to “store up treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal” (Matt 6:20). That kind of treasure, *spiritual* treasure, is permanent. This is what he’s referring to here when he mentions being “rich towards God” (Luke 12:21). Maybe it’s like having an account with God, storing up for your retirement in an IRA that will not disappear or decline, but will be there for you when you need it.

Can your experiences or your character make you “rich towards God”? Can your loyalty as a spouse, your watchcare as a parent, your diligence as a worker, make you rich towards God? I think they can. If you are spiritually loyal, you will not have an overblown opinion of yourself. You’ll probably say “I’m just doing what is right. This is how I was raised.” It will feel as though you have no choice. Of course, you *do* have a choice, but you consistently choose to do things the right way. Setting a course to be the person you want to be will limit some of your choices, but that’s a freely chosen limit. You want to stay on the beaten path.

Life can come to an end at any time. You won’t get a second earth life. So live with purpose now. Store up treasures in heaven, treasures created by spiritual deeds, wise decisions, good actions, strong relationships. All these things are preserved and remembered. God knows every secret thing, whether good or evil (Ecc 12:14). Make that a principle that works for you, by having your secret deeds be good ones. “For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed” (Luke 8:17).