

Dust in the wind, all we are is dust in the wind. For some of us in the congregation, those lyrics by Kansas, written in 1977 are very familiar. They are a modern rendering of this part of Ecclesiastes. Nothing is permanent. Everything we do, and have will not do us one bit of good when we die. We can't take it with us, and we can't really control what happens to our money or our possessions after we leave this earth. Our reading from Ecclesiastes seems pretty depressing. But is it though? It can be uplifting, and freeing in a different sort of way. The teacher says that hard work is worthless, seeking pleasure is worthless, even studying wisdom is worthless. Funny thing for a teacher of wisdom to say! It is all hevel. Hevel is the Hebrew word which is translated as vanity in our reading. But hevel might better be translated as a puff of wind, a fleeting moment, vapor which vanishes. The Teacher would also say that storing up crops by building bigger barns is hevel too. Dust in the wind. The parable of the rich man that Jesus presents to us gives us a lot to think about. My first thought about this parable is, What's so bad about storing something away for a rainy day? Isn't that just prudent?

Isn't that what Joseph did? Remember him? He is one of Jacob's sons, the one with the many colored coat who was sold into slavery by his brothers. He worked for Pharaoh down in Egypt, and he stored grain, as much as he could. As a result, when a massive drought happened, and all the crops failed Joseph was considered the wisest of all for having thought ahead to store up grain. Remember that was what brought his family down to Egypt – the famine – and Joseph gave his brothers some of that stored grain to take back home. So how come that wise practice was considered a good thing in that circumstance, but is condemned by Jesus in this parable?

Let's try to puzzle through this. Luke gives us a hint about the matter when he places the telling of the parable right after the person in the crowd asks Jesus to settle a dispute about inheritance. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, Jesus will be on his way to Jerusalem for quite a few more chapters. But his popularity is growing as he goes. Large crowds begin to follow him. Luke says that the crowd gathered by the thousands.

A person from the crowd asked Jesus about an inheritance problem, and I'm sure for that person it was a very troubling matter. God knows we have all seen families that have been torn apart by the task of dividing the money and possessions of a loved one after they have died. Many people took problems such as this to rabbis in Jesus' day. Jesus would not get involved in this dispute. His answer to the person, and to the whole crowd is, in effect, "Let it go." Easy to say, Jesus! Very hard for us mortals to do! It takes practice, and it takes faith.

"Take care!" Jesus says. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." That is the key to this parable. Let me read the parable to you again and see if you spot the problem and the difference between this rich man, and the story of Joseph from Genesis. ...(parable read with emphasis on "I").

This fellow has focused solely on himself, his possessions, his comfort, his security. He had become more than just a prudent saver for the future. He became greedy, and selfish. Jesus paints a picture that is a caricature; a hoarder in the extreme. None of us is like that rich fool. But we have to be on guard. It is one thing to make plans for our future, our retirement, our children's education. But when we cling to our stuff so tightly, and worry about having enough, then we can't see anything past our own barns. We have lost perspective and lost life.

In the story of Joseph, he was not saving up all that grain for his personal use, or even that of Pharaoh's household, but in order to feed all of the people who were in need when the famine struck. He even fed refugees from other countries.

We have to admit that we all sometimes fall into the trap of wanting more. We are encouraged to over buy, over eat, be overly worried about security. We are led to believe that if we just by such and such, we will be happy. And many times we/I succumb to selfish behavior through fear and anxiety; the fear that we will not be able to get something we think we need. Or the fear that something we have will be taken away from us.

When we are anxious and grasping about money or our stuff we dig ourselves into a deeper pit: we make the things themselves our gods, more to be desired than anything else. That's called idolatry. We forget that God has instructed us that it is in **giving we receive**. God has always told us that our focus should be on those who are less fortunate than we are. And lastly, and most importantly, if we are too intent on getting the newest, greatest product, or building our portfolio, then we will miss what Jesus wants for us, to live life as it should be lived, finding the Kingdom of God where we are, and with what we have now; being satisfied, being generous.

These are the things Jesus hopes the crowd will be able to understand when he tells them this parable. And just think about his audience. We are all wealthy beyond measure compared to the people to whom Jesus was preaching. We save money. They saved grain as a hedge against future famines.

It was a humbling thing to be in another country in which people do not have the advantages that we have, and to see their generosity. When I worked in Honduras I saw people who had next to nothing giving away a jacket to someone who needed it, or bringing a meal to an older housebound parishioner. In one small community wealth was measured in how many bags of

coffee beans you were able to stack up on your porch. Each bag of coffee was worth \$100 and that was their whole savings for the year. A family that had a few bags of coffee to their name, and no indoor plumbing offered us a fresh cup of coffee with sugar and home baked crackers. That's something to put our comfortable lives into perspective!

What good does it do us to be anxious about our money and our possessions? A favorite bumper sticker I've seen reads, "The one who dies with the most toys...still dies."

The goal of the Teacher, in his ironic wisdom, is to help us see that working too hard at anything is not healthy, is not helpful, and ultimately doesn't get us anywhere.

St. Francis said, "Wear the world like a loose garment." I say, "Open your hands and let things flow into them and out of them. You can receive so much more with open hands than with hands that are balled into fists. It's easy to say. It's not so easy to do. It takes practice and it takes faith.

In chapter nine of Ecclesiastes gets to the main point of the whole book. God approves of you already, so eat, drink and be merry.

Now wait a minute. Aren't those the words that Jesus puts into the mouth of the rich fool? "Eat drink and be merry?" How come the rich man is foolish for saying the same thing the wise teacher says?

What's the difference? Here it is: the rich fool is fooling himself. He thinks that his new barns will now allow him to be happy. But he will not be happy. The next thing will come along just down the road which will cause the man to be anxious again about his stores of grain. He will never be able to be truly happy. It is only the man or woman who has let go of the importance of possessions, who is open handed and generous who will truly be able to eat, drink, be merry and know God's peace.