

Sermon: Pentecost 11

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Year C

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Psalms 49:1-11

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

When I was young... if asked my father for something... and he said "No..." I'd almost always go and ask my mother... I thought maybe I'd have a better chance with her... when my brother and I were older... and we'd sometimes argue over something... we almost always wanted a referee... and one of us would go to tell on the other one... hoping of course that that parent would side with us... hoping that somewhere inside of them... they loved us more... would do what we wanted... or give us what we wanted... so we could... maybe only on the inside... stick our tongue out at the loser in triumph... but as we got older... my mother or father would simply raise their hands... and walk away... and say... "Leave me out of this... you two work it out on your own..."

And one of today's brothers... wants Jesus to referee for them... now... wants Jesus to do what my brother and I wanted our parents to do... to make things fair and just now... he wanted Jesus to make a judgement that would almost certainly put a wedge between the two of them... but he didn't seem to care about that... he wanted the inheritance now... not in God's time... but now... and hopefully... we haven't experienced it ourselves... but we at least know stories about families that were torn apart after a matriarch or patriarch passed on... and there was family division over estate division...

The man who wanted to build barns... was motivated by vanity... he was motivated by the accumulation of wealth for wealth's sake... perhaps in making a name for himself... because apparently... from what the text says... he didn't think... the way Judas did about the costly jar of nard... about how he could sell it and use the money to help or feed the poor... he didn't think about setting up a food truck in the synagogue parking lot so the gleaners could come for a few small bags of grain... he didn't think about mercy... he thought about keeping more than he needed... or could ever use... just

because it was his... just because he could... because you just never know what might happen...

Usually... for many of us... we want what we want now... we have not mastered the art of gratification delay... putting off something that satisfies only a little bit now... in favor of something that satisfies deeply later on... like not having that second piece of cake... in favor of losing those extra five pounds... not buying that new car now... in favor of some extra retirement money later on... not running away from a difficult situation now... in favor of working towards a meaningful resolution later on...

We think we want what's fair... we think we love mercy... but we also like to be right... and we like to win... and the desire to win... and the behavior it creates... like keeping score... is a kind of greed... and greed is idolatry... if God was that greedy with all that God gives us... we would all be gnashing our teeth... because greed is an affront to the unmerited and radical grace... and generosity... given to us by God...

John Shea wrote: Greed eats... yet it remains hungry... greed is always self-defeating because of its ultimate goal... greed does not merely want more of its object... it has projected onto its object... a power the object does not have... that's why it's idolatry... the object must give or secure life... and life can mean physical survival... or it can mean a sense of meaning... or zest... or inner calm... but this is the heart of the problem... because life in any of these senses... does not consist in accumulating anything... life cannot be possessed... one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions... that's why greed can never give us... in the deepest part of our being... what we want more than anything...

We have come from God... and we will return to God... we have come from Love... and we will return to Love... we have come from Wholeness... and we will return to Wholeness... but in the meantime... while we are here... because we exist in a physical world... because we experience our existence in a physical way... we use the physical

world around us... to give us what the world cannot give... we substitute power... or authority... or money... or shopping... or alcohol... or food... or anything else which can be addictive... as imperfect substitutes for the things which can never take the place of the Love and Forgiveness of God... and that's why they are and will always remain vanities...

There's a story in the Talmud... about how to determine what's valuable... someone who was thinking about converting to Judaism... asked Rabbi Hillel... to teach him the whole of Torah... while he stood on one leg... Hillel paused for a moment and then replied... *That which is hateful unto you... do not do to your neighbor... this is the whole of the Torah... the rest is commentary...*

And the author of today's Jewish scripture knew something about what's really valuable... the word Ecclesiastes is the Latin transliteration... of the Greek rendering... of the pen-name of this book's author... known in Hebrew as Qoheleth... which literally means Gatherer or Acquirer... gathering things like wealth... and pleasure... and wisdom... the Hebrew name tells us that the author lived and taught in an environment in which people... acquired... the Greek term though... meant *a member of an assembly*... but the word Ecclesiastes was soon interpreted... incorrectly... to mean the one who gathers the assembly... or Preacher...

But what Qoheleth also wrote... are three vv. that end ch. 2 that we didn't hear... vv. 24 - 26 say: there is nothing better for mortals... than to eat and drink... and find enjoyment in their toil... this also... I saw... is from the hand of God... for apart from God... who can eat... or who can have enjoyment... for to the one who pleases him... God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy... but to the sinner God gives the work of gathering and heaping... only to give what is gathered to the one who pleases God... or in our Gospel's context... only for the barns you build and fill and covet... to be given to someone else when your life is demanded from you...

The story from the Talmud... tells us that what matters is doing to others... what we'd have them do to us... everything else is commentary... maybe even vanity... because everything else is simply us justifying to ourselves... why we will... or why we won't do that... coming up with good reasons why others deserve... or don't deserve our favor... and we want our earthly parent... or our divine parent... to take our side... to side with us over our brother... so we can feel proud... justified... maybe even arrogant... the author of Ecclesiastes... concludes that although Wisdom is certainly a path to a well-lived life... it does not... as Job would have liked... answer every question...

Colossians reminds us to seek the things that are above... and since we have already died... and our life is hidden with Christ... we are to put to death things like greed... because greed is idolatry... it allows us to fool ourselves into believing that we need only that thing we desire... and have no need of God...

[draw circle in center of palm]... This is where we feel the pain and loss of life... [cover hand with other hand]... but this is a greatness... a wholeness that is the kingdom of God... which contains our pain... and in this merciful space... our immediate lives can unfold... it is where we are held in God's love... and as we know both the pain [draw circle] and the love [cover hand]... our wounds will heal...

Jesus would not get dragged into an imperfect and divisive family squabble... because Jesus is about perfection and reconciliation... and as Richard Rohr teaches us... the only real perfection of which humans are capable... is to include... absorb... forgive... and transform human imperfection... we are conduits and transformers... much more than we are self-sufficient generators... such is the character of a whole... and holy human being...

St. Bonaventure said: *Christ is the one whose center is everywhere... and whose circumference is nowhere...* this is the Wholeness that holds us... we can't understand this Wholeness intellectually... or make rational sense of it... nor can we control it...

But we can participate in God's perfect mercy... in God's all-inclusive and impartial love... when we stop excluding even the dark parts of ourselves... and fall into the Wholeness that holds us... because those dark spots don't keep God from loving us one tiny bit... or justifying and redeeming us fully...

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