

Sermon: Pentecost 8

The Rev. Mike Wernick

August 4, 2019

Year C

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

Psalm 49:1-11

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

Luke writes so much about hospitality... I think I'm going to invite him over for dinner... just to stay on his good side... I mean... on June 23... we heard about the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes who asked Jesus to leave... on June 30... about the village of the Samaritans who would not receive Jesus... on July 7... about the seventy who went out and had to rely on the hospitality of others... on July 14... about the hospitality of The Good Samaritan... on July 21... about Martha's hospitality... last Sunday... about the hospitality of both the man who knocks and the man in bed... but today... there's something in the Gospel... which challenges our ability to be hospitable...

If you've driven anywhere in Ohio... you've probably seen them... most are white... or red... and a couple are unpainted... they're different shapes... and various designs... and have different owners... what they have in common though... is that they're painted with a bright emblem on one side... and they convey a hospitable message... they're Ohio's Bicentennial Barns...

Beginning five years before the 2003 bicentennial... artist Scott Hagan painted one in each of Ohio's 88 counties... and according to the bicentennial commission's final report... Hagan traveled about 65,000 miles... and used 650 gallons of paint... that's a little more than seven gallons per barn... and the report describes the program as an inexpensive... grassroots marketing campaign... and as of January 2015... all but one of the barns was still standing...

But we know from our own travels throughout Ohio and the midwest... that like the barn on our bulletin cover... many which dot the landscape are dilapidated... or have fallen down... or are knocked down... or are blown down... they do not all last...

Vanity of vanities... says the Teacher... all is vanity... this is not the kind of vanity about which Carly Simon sang... in the song You're So Vain... which was... by the way... written about Warren Beatty... Ecclesiastes' vanity is not egotistical... not concerned with appearance... or about what others think... this kind of vanity recognizes... that much of what we hold as permanent and unchanging... is actually ephemeral... a chasing after wind... it is at worst... inconsequential... and at best... transitory... look at the Great Library at Alexandria... the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus... the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus... the Colossus of Rhodes... the Hanging Gardens of Babylon... the Statue of Zeus at Olympia... all... intended at least figuratively... to outlast time... but all of them gone...

Let me try to be clear... this does not mean... that what we do... doesn't matter... of course it matters... but the things we think... the things we do... and the things we create... are not ends unto themselves... they are vehicles which carry us along... which form us... which provide opportunities for the fullness of God to be made more present in our awareness... as our reading from Colossians encourage us... *to set your minds on things that are above... not on things that are on earth...* and then... the choices we make... will be more and more in line... with God's choices for us...

This brings us to the three men in our Gospel... the first two are arguing over money... and Jesus reminds them that... *one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions...* and I am increasingly mindful of what I have and what I want... and how I already have more than I really need... it's like the Israelites in the wilderness... wanting to store up as much manna as they could... afraid that they wouldn't have enough... and not trusting God to take care of them every day...

Over the years... I've been adding to my box collection... mostly small boxes... made of wood... stone... metal... paper... glass... porcelain... gourds... I have perhasp... somewhere around 100... and I'm at a point... where I'm questioning whether I really need to add to them... I'm at a point... where I'm wondering what will happen to all of them when I die... as the Gospel says... *and the things you have prepared... whose will they be?*

And if you think about it... there are some people missing from this Gospel... there's nothing about the laborers who have planted or harvested the rich man's land... none of his relatives are mentioned... he lives alone... isolated... not in community... in fact... he doesn't seek advice from anyone else... he engages in a monologue only with himself... and he has been given an abundant blessing... but there's no indication that he will share any of it with anyone else... a reminder... that the sin of Sodom was really the cities' lack of hospitality... their unwillingness... due to their pride and haughtiness... to share their excess food... and prosperous ease... with those who were poor and marginalized...

Seminary professor Elisabeth Johnson writes... like the rich farmer... we are tempted to think that having large amounts of money... and possessions stored up... will make us secure... sooner or later... however... we learn that no amount of wealth or property can secure our lives... no amount of wealth can protect us from a genetically inherited disease... or from a tragic accident... no amount of wealth can keep our relationships healthy or our families from falling apart... in fact... wealth and property can easily drive a wedge between family members... as in the case of the brothers fighting over their inheritance at the beginning of this text...

In v. 15... the Greek word that's translated as life... does in fact mean life... either literally or figuratively... but in vv. 19 - 20... the Greek word that's translated as both soul... and life... is *psyche*... it refers to the mental realm... and God said to him... *You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you...* and we think it's God talking...

don't we... saying... *Tonight I'm going to take your life...* but Bp. Satterlee points out that it's not God... but his possessions which are going to take his life from him... can we imagine God saying... *You fool... your psychological health is being compromised by your obsession with things... you're obsessing about them so much... that you can find no inner peace... what you're in relationship with isn't in relationship with you... you've mistakenly turned to things... turn to me... it's I who love you...*

And the readings from Ecclesiastes and from this Gospel... both ask the question... *who's will these things be when you're gone... you have no control of that...* and there's nothing wrong with having nice things... like the collection I mentioned... but our reading from Colossians says it quite plainly... *greed is idolatry... greed is idolatry...* and all three synoptics... the three Gospels that are most in sync with each other... Matthew 24:35... Mark 13:31... and Luke 21:33... all say the same thing about things... *Heaven and earth will pass away... but My words will not pass away...* and Hebrews 13:14 says... *for here we have no lasting city... but we are looking for the city that is to come...*

It reminds me of this decluttering regime created by Marie Kondo... you know... where you only keep those things which give you joy... she wrote... *the question of what you want to own... is actually the question of how you want to live your life... with the arrival mass production... people have come to own more things than ever before... this makes our lives easier and more convenient... but as a result... many of us own a lot of things... sometimes many more than is necessary... I think that the recent interest in tidying... she said... is showing that people began to shift their mindset... and are now feeling the need to possess only what is necessary... and lead a simpler life...* wWhen what we have... owns us... it is impossible to give it away... because those things are not ours to give... but when we own... what we have... giving some of it away... becomes the means of God's grace... Bp. Satterlee said... the best way to release the power of excess wealth on our lives... is to give it away... for the cause... and in the name of Jesus...