

## **“We Never Willingly Seek a Life that Is Empty in Spirit”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of  
St. Andrew’s United Church  
(and Joint Service with St. Mark’s and with St. Peter’s)  
for Sunday, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016

Scripture Readings: Eccl. 1:12-14; 2:18-23  
Luke 12:13-21

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

So often the Christian faith is expressed through music, and the tradition of Wesley and the Methodists augmented the role of music to a new significance.

The book of Ecclesiastes is the book most often sung in both Christian oriented music and secular tunes, and while Ecclesiastes 3 is the main focal point of that music (“There is a time for everything under the sun”), the verses read here today also have images that lend themselves to memorable intonations and philosophical discussion.

Such German philosophers as Schleiermacher, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche have images, as well as an approach to scripture and the world, that echo the opening of Ecclesiastes, while some might say the dark and gloomy image of the world and the future painted by Donald Trump also reflect the despair of Ecclesiastes.

So what is Qoheleth, or “The Preacher” (the translation of the Hebrew for the title “Ecclesiastes” from the original Bible) trying to say in this passage?

The basic question offered by Ecclesiastes, and also Luke, is “What does it mean to be rich toward God?”

An interesting framing of the passages, in the words of David Schlafer. “What does it mean to be rich toward God?”

And Pastor Stephen Schmidt says that being “rich toward God” has “nothing to do with our possessions.”

What does it have to do with?

It is an attitude, an outlook, a spirit of perception and of commitment for the good of all.

There are many images we can use to come to grips with what the biblical witness is trying to say to us. Annie Dillard in her book *For the Time Being*, a follow-up to her Pulitzer Prize winning book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, quotes Midrash from the Jewish tradition:

When a person arrives in the world as a baby,  
“his hands are clenched as though to say  
‘Everything is mine. I will inherit it all.’  
When he departs from the world, his hands are  
open, as though to say ‘I have acquired nothing  
from the world.’

An English observer, seeing the Sisters of Charity working in Calcutta, reasoned: "Either life is always and in all circumstances sacred, or intrinsically of no account; it is inconceivable that it should be in some cases one, and in some the other."

The truth is none of us want to live a life not worth living, or in religious or spiritual terms, we do not want to live a life that is not filled with the spirit. We eventually get to a state in life where possessions and acquiring things is of little or no consequence, but sometimes the road to that state is a long one. There is so much around us that we imagine we need to have.

Joseph Fitzmeyer in his *Anchor Bible* commentary on this passage remarks: "It is much more important to be than to have – to be one who listens to God's word and acts on it than to live in an unnecessary abundance of wealth."

As Luke says, the goal of life is not piling up treasures for ourselves – physical treasures at least. Luke says that if we value possessions, we only see life as "eat, drink and be merry." Now the truth is within Ecclesiastes chapter 3 that is seen as the goal of life – to eat, drink and be merry. But the perspective is different in each book.

For Luke, if we see life fulfilled only by food, drinking (and here there is no expectation he means anything other than needed fluids, not alcohol drinking as the term implies in English – sorry about that) and merriment, then we have missed a spiritual component. And for Ecclesiastes, he is saying that there are far more important things to worry about and be obsessed about than food, water, joy. Accept all of that as a given, and see value beyond that.

Douglas Oakman in an article within the book *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, sees in the story of the man building more barns to store his grain holdings a symbol of all those who put their own wealth ahead of other people; indeed, many have gained wealth in the time of Jesus and Luke by taking advantage of the working crews who were peasant labourers and never given any advantage in life.

And so this story stands as a reminder of the great divide in society.

While many do not want to turn the biblical witness into a political treatise, and I must say I am, for the most part, in that camp, it is not inaccurate to state that today's gospel story is the calling cry of the Bernie Sanders supporters who complain about the great wealth owned and controlled by .1% of the population.

You see issues of extreme wealth and extreme poverty are not new to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Most of us here are old enough to remember the Hunt Brothers of Texas, if indeed we heard the story as it broke in the 1970's. In 1973, the Hunt family began buying silver in enormous quantities as a hedge against inflation.

By 1979, Nelson Bunker Hunt and William Herbert Hunt, along with some wealthy Arabs, formed a silver pool, amassing more than 200 million ounces of silver, equivalent to about half the world's deliverable supply.

When they began buying silver, the price was \$1.95 an ounce. By 1979 it was \$5.00 an ounce, and by early 1980 the price peaked at \$54 an ounce for silver.

Such wealth opportunity meant that others jumped on board, but eventually the government stepped in and changed the trading rules for the metals market, and on March 27, 1980 the price plummeted from \$21.62 to \$10.80 in one day.

By 1987, the Hunt brothers, once members of arguably the richest family in America, declared bankruptcy, with liabilities of nearly \$2.5 billion against assets of \$1.5 billion. In August, 1988, they were convicted of conspiring to manipulate the market.

The silver market collapsed March 27, 1980. The end of hope; the destruction of hope.

Or was it? Barely two weeks later, on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1980, Terry Fox began his Marathon of Hope. There are always people out there who remind us that life is more than riches; value is more than monetary value; hope is more than getting it right or being on top.

There is an empty game in looking to the rich and judging them, in the ways of Bernie Sanders and company, for the truth is all of us are far more comfortable and successful than 90% of the world. To many, having a house without rats in the ceiling or having running water that is reliable to drink is a sign of immense wealth.

Rather than be ready for the judgment of others, we would be better to examine our own lives, and determine how we can act and serve in ways that lift up the well-being of all.

We may have needs in our lives, but the most important need is to experience a sense of spiritual fulfillment.

We never willingly seek a life that is empty in spirit – at least we should not.