

Ecclesiastes 1:2,22-23; Colossians 3:1-2; St. Luke 12:13-21

Dear Friends in Christ,

You saw the sermon theme for this morning and thought...well, I don't know exactly what you thought, but these words of Scripture came to mind as I thought about the appointed texts for this morning: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." (Phil. 1:21) In other words, the object of life isn't to stay alive. The object of life isn't to simply pursue fun and good times. The object of life is to serve and glorify Christ. And, of course, to die in Christ.

And a couple of verses later Paul writes, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." (Phil. 1:23b) Some might argue, "It's only far better if I can die in my sleep." So, here we go . . .

THE PERILS OF PUTZING

I. The Connection.

As a verb, to "putz" is "to engage in inconsequential or unproductive activity." With that in mind, here's a question for you: Did you notice the connection between the three Scripture readings for this morning? First, there's this from Ecclesiastes:

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.... What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

It is important to understand how the word "vanity" is being used in this text. Defined, it's "the quality of being worthless or futile." "All is vanity" - how about futile? Then there's the meaning of "vexation" in the statement "his work is a vexation". Defined, it's "the act of harassing or vexing: troubling." (Webster) Finally, there's the importance of understanding who it is the Holy Spirit uses to give these insights: Solomon. The wisest and one of the wealthiest humans ever. Some might insist, "This isn't the positive we want to hear and pursue!" I will tell you this: The inevitable grave says something far different.

Second, there's the rich fool from our Gospel lesson and his take on life:

"I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" (Lk. 12:18-19)

Well, how about that? There is a way around "All is vanity." For a moment. "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you...'" (Lk. 12:20) So, a little self-deception, a lot of collecting, and then some serious putzing around (relax, eat, drink, be merry!) and *poof!* The party is over.

Third, there's our Epistle lesson. A real alternative to putzing and death:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. (Co. 3:1,2)

See the connection between the three texts? They're about life and how we live it; about priorities and where they will take us. The first text: Just every day living which offers futility and is troublesome. The second text: Self-fulfillment and delusion. The first and second end with the unexpected, "This night your soul is required of you." So does the third text, the Epistle lesson, with one massive difference: The unexpected moment when we are lifted into "the things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." And that forever and ever! It's "seek the things that are above...Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."

II. The Constant.

If the church is faithful to the Word then its message is not popular. There was that moment in a confrontation Jesus had with His brothers where we're told, "For not even his brothers believed in him." (Jn. 7:5) Jesus responded to a charge they made against Him by saying, "The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil." (Jn. 7:7) And that's it! That's the constant. You know the Scripture: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3:23) Most don't want to hear it and, when they do, will hate it: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned..." (Rom. 5:12)

I know. Some are probably thinking, "I'd rather hear something different." Some are probably thinking, "Well you can't keep pushing this in the face of the young ones! They have so much life to live!" Really? No-one knows how much time anyone has. Listen. The Psalmist says:

How can a young man keep his way pure? (And this is not excluding young women - and younger boys and girls!) By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. (Ps. 119:9-11)

The Word is to be stored up in their hearts! And when the adult disciples figured that the children should not bother Jesus, Jesus said, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." (Mk. 10:14b) In fact, dear friends, I cannot recall Jesus ever discussing the importance of a child's worldly success as equal to or outweighing the importance of everlasting life! Can you?

In fact, Jesus put it this way: "...whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." (Matt. 18:6) It's the constant: Jesus said, "I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins." (Jn. 8:24) Nothing hard to understand about that statement - right? After all, we must remember what Jesus said regarding "The Parable of the Rich Fool": "So is the one (a rich fool!) Who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." (Lk. 12:21)

III. The Focus.

Recall that definition of "putz" I put in front of us at the beginning of the sermon: "To engage in inconsequential or unproductive activity." That's where our Epistle lesson takes us - avoidance of "putzing". Again, "if then you have been raised with Christ seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." *Not-on-things-that-are-on-earth.*

So, that's the focus. Sure, we live in this world. We work in it. We seek a vocation. We do things, go places, accumulate a certain amount of stuff. And all of it is just for a moment. In everything we do of this world we are to do so completely aware that it's only for a moment. And whatever our hopes and dreams of the future might be must be tempered with the hard reality: *subject to change without notice.*

Job says, "Remember that my life is a breath..." (Job 7:7a) How could any of us ignore the words of Moses: "The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty (and we could add, eighty or more if all the right drugs are available); yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away." (Ps. 90:10) And the Psalmist says, "For my days pass away like smoke..." (Ps. 102:3a) and, elsewhere, "Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow." (Ps. 144:4) Isaiah warns, "Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for what account is he?" (Is. 2:22) And James warns, "...you do not know what tomorrow will bring, what is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." (Jms. 4:14)

You know something? If you're a serious student of Scripture then you will never be allowed to become that overjoyed by this world - which is why much of the church today, if not most, has become more selective about which Scriptures it will embrace. If you're a student of Scripture then you are allowed to step up to the Cross of Jesus and see the greatness of God's love for you! You are allowed to enter an empty tomb where death was vanquished. And you have constant access to Jesus' words, "I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." (Jn. 14:3b) That's worthy of being overjoyed!

And so, we began the sermon with the words of Paul: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Could it be any different for us; we who were bought with His blood and live with the assurance of forgiveness of sin and everlasting life?

When we began the sermon for this morning we were confronted by these words of Paul: "...to depart and be with Christ...is far better." Well, thinking about what this world has always been, where it is and where it's headed, how do you see it?

Here's my advice for you and me: Don't be a putz.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott

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- II. The Constant.*
- III. The Focus.*

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