

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2, 12-15, 2:18-23
Luke 12:13-21

Word count: 1,590

Counselor and author Barry J. Robinson tells a story: “Once upon a time, there were two old men who had lived together for many years, and in all that time they had never quarreled, never fought, never so much as had a disagreement. So, one day, one of them said, ‘Do you suppose we should *try* to have a quarrel at least once just to see what it feels like?’

‘Well, perhaps,’ said the other, “but I don’t really know how a quarrel happens.’

‘Look,’ said the other, ‘I take a brick and put it between us, and I say, “This is mine!” and you say, “No, it’s mine!” After that, the quarrel begins.’

“So they placed the brick between them, and one of them said, ‘This is mine!’

“The other said, ‘No, it’s mine!’ So the other said, ‘Okay, it is yours!’

“And they went away unable to fight with one another and never thought about trying to again.”

What in the end, do we actually own—is it something uniquely ours that we have to fight over, or is it something that we recognize that we came into this world sharing a part of, and passing it on as we do?

I am going to share a second reading from the lectionary today in a moment. In both of our readings, you hear the source of expressions that are no doubt familiar. In Ecclesiastes, you hear, “Vanity of vanities—all is vanity.” And we all know, “Eat drink and be merry for tomorrow you may be dead,” which is actually what happened to the man who said it in Jesus’ parable of the rich man. If nothing else, I am sure that there are some here who will be gratified to know that, “Eat, drink and be merry,” is actually from the Bible.

Both the writer of Ecclesiastes, reported to be the aging King Solomon, and the man in Jesus’ parable, have drawn different conclusions about life and their life’s work, but both have forgotten what the point of our work on earth is about in the first place.

The old teacher in Ecclesiastes is bitter:

“Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

“I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

“I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity. “

And the rich man in the parable in Luke is predictably smart about his work:

“Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and 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.’”

The two scriptures are two different viewpoints that arise from believing that what we are spending our lives doing somehow ultimately belongs to us.

Bernard Brandon Scott is a well-known scholar with ties to the Jesus Seminar, and he will be visiting us here at IUCC in February. In his book, *Here Then the Parable*, he says that this is not one of Jesus’ more radical parables. It is a parable that builds heavily on a tradition that had been with Israel for many generations. This tradition taught that the land (meaning everything) does not belong to us, in fact it is the sole property of the Creation, and our work on earth is to manage it for all. This is part of a tradition that we have moved further and further away from understanding, though it is a biblical concept. We have come to assume that the things we possess are ours. Hence, a source of many of our problems.

On some level, this ancient and biblical tradition must ring true to us—how did we ever come to agree upon the concept of bankruptcy laws—the notion that old debts can be wiped clean and a new slate started, if we are not somehow in tune with the biblical idea of Jubilee, that time every fifty years when imbalances were corrected, debts were forgiven and slaves set free? This certainly goes hand in hand. How has our idea of ownership changed since then?

Jesus tells a story with parallels in common lore and deep connections to the wisdom tradition of his people, wherein a miraculous harvest is mismanaged because a man is out of communion both with his neighbors and with God. The story and tradition out of which it comes is a radical statement about the ownership of property. It says that prosperity is given to some only so that all may benefit.

From Jesus’ point of view and, no doubt, from that of a good number of his listeners, the rich man has one fault and it is a big one. He begins to think that the blessing he has been given is his.

“...And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” In fact, the point of our work and the time we spend bumping up against one another in this and every lifetime, is the hope that what we do ultimately enriches the creation we have been set down in—placed here to love, to nurture, to feed—and to feel the effects of the goodness of other human beings and the social orders they create, to be sure, and to leave this earth better than when we found it.

What the aging King Solomon, or the bitter teacher who speaks in his name is doing is focusing only on the fact that he has been working, and for what? He seems to expect a good measure of recognition and reward for his work—something tangible. It seems impossible, given his despair, that he could have thought for a moment that his reward was in moving the human condition forward.

Barry Robinson says, “It’s interesting, and quite frankly, insightful that Luke sets this story in a context where Jesus is approached by someone who is concerned about how a family inheritance is to be divided, one who wants to make sure he gets his fair share. Is there anyone here who does not know this story about what happens when people set out to make sure they get what they believe is rightfully theirs? How many family squabbles, how many broken relationships, how many terrible hurts have been caused by that family argument?

“And all because we begin to assume that what is essentially a gift is something that is ours—without reference to anyone else, without regard for human need.”

There is another way. It is the only way by which Creation is honored; and that is to recognize that there is no mine or yours anymore than there is just you or just me. We are in this together; and if we ever hope to survive as a species, if we ever hope to learn what it truly means to belong to one another, then it will happen not by seeing how much we can continue to store up for

ourselves and ourselves alone but how we need to distribute the abundance with which we have been blessed with all who have less.

In “Wishful Thinking,” Frederick Buechner writes, “People are free in this world to live for themselves alone if they want to and let the rest go hang, and they are free to live out the dismal consequences as long as they can stand it. The doctrine of Hell proclaims that they retain this same freedom in whatever world comes next. Thus the possibility of making damned fools of ourselves would appear limitless.”

And if this sounds radical, then you are hearing the scriptures clearly today; because in the domain of God as it is described to us, both the one that is now and the one that is to come, there are no arguments over what belongs to whom. Once upon a time, two old friends tried to argue over a brick, but found that it just didn’t matter. And that’s how they could live happily ever after.

We begin at this table. No matter who you are or where you are on your faith journey, you are welcome here. Bring your pain and troubles to this table and eat and drink hope.

Sermon Illustrations

Some illustrations were found in Barry Robinson’s “Keeping the Faith in Babylon: a Pastoral Resource for Christians in Exile” Included: Frederick Buechner quote & Bernard Brandon Scott reference.

Scripture for Sunday, August 1, 2010

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

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I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Luke 12:13-21

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” 14 But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” 15 And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” 16 Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ 18 Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ 20 But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”