

Working for the Man Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:18-26
August 4th, 2013 Pentecost 11C Pastor Rob Zeratsky

You know, it's one of the more depressing sights I've seen in my life; the dumpster in the driveway. Now, there are a number of reasons a person could rent a dumpster for; home renovations or deep cleaning, but the one I've seen that depresses me is when it's time for the kids to clean out the house after their parents pass. There's so many years of accumulated stuff, and it's not like it's outright *junk*, but most of it only had value to the person who passed. Sure, the kids sort through it usually, but they have plenty of furniture and flatware already, they've got enough knickknacks littered around their own house and so much of what was carefully collected over an entire lifetime ends up just filling space in a landfill somewhere. As I said, I find the whole ordeal depressing. But not because a person's lifetime of possessions ends up in the trash, but rather because so much of that person's life was wasted collecting all those things that amounted to absolutely nothing. And it is to that very idea that God speaks to us today in our reading. <read text: Ecc 1:2, 2:18-23>

Meaningless, meaningless. If you've ever taken the time to read the book of Ecclesiastes, that refrain probably sounds familiar. If you haven't read it, I'm going to go ahead and recommend you take the time to do so. Maybe even make it a regular event. Why? I think it speaks particularly well to us in American society. God's wisdom throughout scripture is timeless and as Solomon himself says in this book, "There is nothing new under the sun." And the temptations we face in our culture are nothing new to Solomon thousands of years ago.

What do I mean by that? Well, what are we raised and taught from little on? To have. To get. To acquire. Now maybe these aren't the lessons our parents explicitly taught us, but they are the ones we learn anyway. That having equals happiness. If you have enough, you win. Or if you have enough then you have the power to do what you want. Or, probably the most implicit lesson our society tries to teach, if you have the most, you win. These are all things that at some point or on some level we end up buying into. They're all tenets that affect the choices and decisions we make in life. They influence how we choose to spend our time and how we spend our money. And they are all, every single one of them, lies.

How do we know that? We have the inspired word of God written down for us to say as much. And not just some random source that God used, but rather a man who got to the end of the rainbow of material promises and saw what the pot of gold there looked like. He had it all. Wealth beyond anyone else. More women than he could enjoy in a year's time. Wisdom from God himself completely unparalleled. He had it all, and his summary judgment of it: meaningless.

Has the pursuit of material possessions ever brought us real happiness? Has it really given us the ability to be our own masters, has it really given us the satisfaction that it promises? No. But without thinking about it too hard, we just assume that's because we haven't gotten enough. We need more to realize the promises. We need to step up our collecting and our having, that's the problem. We convince ourselves not that the problem is with the promises, but that we haven't done enough to get there yet. And so on and on it goes. We spend life in pursuit of the perfect collection of things. A bank account stable enough to weather any catastrophe. A garage filled with a power tool for every occasion. That perfect set of furniture that finally matches the rug and the curtains. The kitchen or garage we need to organize it all properly in. Always just one more little detail to slide into place and then we'll be complete. But once we get that detail, well hmm, still not complete, still not content. Must be something else still missing. And on and on it goes again.

So we like to think stuff hasn't brought us the happiness we need because we just haven't completed the process yet. But that's not it at all. Solomon did it. He had more than he could ever enjoy in a lifetime, he had unparalleled power and authority, and he called it all meaningless. We pile up, we collect, we organize, we perfect all to get to that one point where everything's in exactly the right place and we are complete.

And then you die.

And your children, or whoever's in charge of it, back a dumpster up your driveway and throw most of it away.

It's meaningless.

And because they already have a place of their own, they take the house you spent a lifetime getting to be exactly how you wanted it and they sell it to someone else who tears it all out and spends their life making it how they want.

It's meaningless.

You work hard to gather it all up, you spend your nights with thoughts filled about keeping it organized and getting more and fixing what's breaking and there's never any rest in it all and in the end it amounts to absolutely nothing.

It's meaningless.

So what, then? If none of it means anything does that mean we should just curl up in a corner and give up? No, that's not what Solomon is saying here. He's not saying all of life is meaningless. He's not even saying of having something is entirely meaningless. And as he says here, working is not meaningless either. Read carefully, he's speaking to a very specific condition. How does he qualify the things he has that are meaningless? How does he qualify the work he does that he calls pointless? He uses the phrase "under the sun". Which means what? It's just a poetic way of labeling the things of this world. The work of this world that yields only the things of this world. Piling up the junk of this world, that's meaningless. That's just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

But that is not all there is for us in this world, is there? There is more, and Solomon identifies that for us in the remainder of our reading: <read text Ecc 24-26>.

If nothing you build up in this life will last, if the effort to stockpile and arrange is meaningless, then where can we find meaning? In something beyond this life. In our God. It is our God who is capable of giving our lives meaning as we well know. You and I know the truth, that without our God, our lives would be one long, blind, desperate scramble with no point, punctuated by a death sentence that would never be reversed. It is our God who gives us true life and a true hope. By the death and resurrection of Jesus we have been spared the pit and we have been given meaning in our lives.

It's a new perspective that the life in God has. It is capable of seeing the meaninglessness of so much of what our culture chases after, and it is capable of being content with exactly what God chooses to give us. Things like fixing up the house becomes something we can do if we get the chance, not a desperate scramble to get done before it's "too late". Having things we enjoy becomes something we do as God allows, something we enjoy with thanks to God, not something we need to do to be "complete", not the driving force of our lives.

God makes it clear that the accumulation of wealth leads to nothing, then the meaning must be found in our actions, as Solomon says here. The best we can look to do is enjoy our days as they are. Find contentment in our work and in the things we have. And why shouldn't we be? Look at what we have! We have food and drink, clothing and shelter. We have work God has given us to do for him. God-pleasing work was a gift given to Adam before the fall into sin. And really, what else is there to look for? What "better" could we have when we have life eternal with our God? What more is there than to have the God of creation look at our faults and say "I forgive you"? We can enjoy what we have, but even that can only be done in God.

And so here's where we see the balance, the fine line between the God-pleasing use of what he gives us, and the meaningless chasing that Solomon writes about. Is it wrong to save up for a home theater system or a boat or a summer home? No! Is wrong to work hard so your family can have nice things to enjoy? No! These things are not wrong or meaningless in themselves, but the attitude that we carry them out with makes them so. Is it the getting that is the end goal for you? Is it the reveling in your stuff that is your motivation? Is it the comfort of having a pile of money so you can feel secure your reason for working? Those are the reasons that chase after the wind.

But do you do your work because God has set it before you to do, and do you enjoy the things he gives you as gifts from him? To put it plainly; is your focus and your joy in the Lord or in the stuff? Is your reason for doing to have more or is it simply because it is from the Lord? If it is in the Lord then that will affect just how we use and enjoy the treasures he's given us. We come to understand that contributing to his work may be more important than finally owning the boxed set of Friends on DVD or that kitchen tile we've always wanted. I'm not here to make you feel guilty about enjoying the blessings God has made available to you in your life. But seriously consider how much effort you might be wasting on things that are just meaningless while at the same time there are souls dying for eternity all around us.

And a life of godly contentment is great gain. Solomon tells us that God pours out his blessings on those who please him (read: those who belong to Christ), but to the unrepentant sinner who chases after the world, he is condemned to store up just to hand it over to the one God chooses. The disparity in material wealth may not be what you'd expect from such a statement. After all, the faithful are often those of humble means and the sinners are those who rake in the big bucks. But God isn't talking about material wealth here. Martin Luther summed it up nicely when he spoke about the true wealth of the godly, "In short, the pious truly possess the whole world, because they enjoy it with happiness and tranquility. But the impious do not possess it even when they have it."

So look at the effort you expend in this life and what you spend the rewards on. Is it on the meaningless that will only be given to someone else after you're gone, or just thrown away? Or are you working for the Lord because of what he's done for you? Find your contentment in simple work for him, spend your effort and your wealth on what matters and it will truly have meaning. Amen.