

Joyful Work

St. Mark Lutheran
Two services

Pastor Ken Welsh
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Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. (Ch. 1:2)

I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. (1:12-14)

I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and use my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toils of my labor under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. 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. (Ch. 2:18-23)

There is nothing better for a person than he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This is also vanity and a striving after wind. (2:24-26)

Grace and peace to you this day from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I wonder how many of you know what kind of book this is? It's a dictionary. I am sure you know why we use a book like this. If you don't know what a word means, you can use a dictionary.

For example, you can find definitions for the word "meaning" in a dictionary. You can also find various definitions for the word "life". A dictionary is helpful but has its limitations. It can define the word "meaning", and it can define the word "life", but it can't tell you the "meaning of life".

I used a dictionary to look up a word from our Old Testament reading this morning. Ecclesiastes 1:2, states this: "Vanity of Vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." Who is this Preacher? He is Solomon, Son of David and King of Israel. He says that all is "vanity". That's one way of looking at life. What does "vanity" mean? My dictionary defines it as the quality of being in vain, in other words, empty, futile, meaningless.

Now here is a question with which many people struggle. I thought this might be of particular interest to the young people from Immanuel Lutheran Church in Downer's Grove, Illinois, who are visiting us this morning. This is a question you really need to answer: "What is the meaning of life?"

The Preacher at the beginning of Ecclesiastes 1 says that life is meaningless. He says this because a man can work his entire life, and in the end, what happens? He dies, and someone else gets the benefit of all his hard work! That depresses a lot of people. Our lives end and we can't take any of what we have gathered with us. Thus, the Preacher in the first part of Ecclesiastes proclaims life to be meaningless.

If one views life this way, and his possessions and how much wealth he has amassed is the most important thing in his life, it can be truly depressing as he grows older and nears the end of life as we know it on this earth. This leads to statements such as "Eat, drink, and be merry, for soon we shall die." Our Gospel reading for this day gives us a title for that kind of philosophy of life. It states that a person who believes this is a "Fool"!

Luke 12 teaches us by using a parable this morning. It tells us about a rich man whose land was producing so much he ran out of room in which to store his crops. So what did he do? Did he start a welfare program to help the poor? No. Did he package some of the food and send it where it could feed some hungry people? No, he didn't do that. He decided to tear down his barns to build larger ones. His goal in life was to have ample goods for many years so that he could "relax, eat, drink, and be merry". But God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you..."

Now, this is a parable, but it probably represents millions and millions of people who think this way. Many years ago I was out visiting people who had not been to church for a couple of years. One such man greeted me at his front door, took me on a tour of his beautifully landscaped grounds, and then took me through the rooms of the exquisite house that he had built. When I was ready to leave, he informed me that he did not have time to come to church, that he was too busy taking care of things at home. He was still a relatively young man, but a few years later he unexpectedly died. I leave his judgment to Jesus, but that experience has stuck with me all of these years.

But note that our reading from Ecclesiastes this morning offers another way to approach work. Chapter 2, verse 24 directs us by saying, "There is nothing better for a person that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy..." The Preacher tells us in Ecclesiastes this morning that the meaning of life is found in God. Our dictionary cannot tell us the meaning of life, but the Bible does. It tells us why the world is in the deplorable situation that it is. It tells us that God sent a Savior named Jesus. It tells us that he fulfilled all sorts of prophecies, and did many kinds of miracles, to prove that he was who he said he was. It tells us that we are all sinners, and yet Jesus still loves us, and that he died on the cross so that we could be forgiven of our sins.

I was privileged to be a youth director for over thirty years before I started down the road to be a pastor. We almost always sang a song or two as we finished our meetings before the altar at our old sanctuary, which is now our fellowship hall. One of our favorite songs included this verse: "Happiness is to know the Savior, living a life within his favor, having a change in my behavior, happiness is the Lord!" That was true then, and it is true now. Wealth and possessions are not a sin, and they can bring us temporary joy, but knowing Jesus is the only thing that can bring us everlasting joy. And the Lord doesn't want to be second, third, or twentieth in our life. He wants to be the most important thing in our life. If anything else is more important, we need to take action. As Pastor Mark said last week, we need to move other things, which are of some importance, out of the way, and let God be where he properly belongs, in first place in our lives. Do you realize that anything else is idolatry? As we serve God and serve our fellow man, we will find a life full of meaning, and a great reward at the end.

So as we leave this morning, let us take the words of Ecclesiastes 2:26 with us: "For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy..." And let us find joy in our work, remembering who we are and whom we represent in our work. ! Corinthians 10:31 says, "Whatever you do, do to the glory of God." Colossians 3:2 gives us a proper focus when it says, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died (that's the old nature in us), and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Then comes a wonderful promise. "When Christ who is your life appears, then you will appear with him in glory." May God grant this to us all for Jesus' sake. Amen.