

The Meaning of Work

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on September 9, 2018

This morning we are turning to the third sermon in our ten part series on the book of Ecclesiastes. Written by Solomon, Ecclesiastes is the reflection of a king of Israel near the end of his days where he ponders the meaning of life. Over the course of twelve chapters, Solomon discusses how humans seek meaning through the pursuit of pleasure, the attainment of wisdom, investing in our work, seeking status, gaining riches, and advancing our knowledge before declaring the conclusion of the matter.

And now, turning to today's Bible lesson, we will be reading from Ecclesiastes, chapter two, verses seventeen through twenty six.

Ecclesiastes 2:17-26

17 So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind. 18 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 19 - 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. 20 So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, 21 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. 22 What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? 23 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. 24 There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; 25 for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? 26 For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

A common source of despair for many seniors is the contemplation of what will happen to everything they have accumulated over a lifetime once they are gone. What will happen to the family heirlooms that have been passed down for three generations? What will happen to the photo albums, the china collection, the antique furniture, and the beautiful piano?

What will happen to all the things that they have worked hard to obtain and preserve over their lifetime? Will it be passed on to the next generation who will greatly benefit from it and cherish it always, or will it end up in the landfill two weeks after the funeral?

In today's Scripture lesson, King Solomon is contemplating this question, and many more that are closely related. Having neared the end of his days, Solomon looks over the kingdom that he has built over decades and expresses a bitterness that someone else who has not earned it will inherit it all. To him this does not seem fair, and it makes him upset.

After all, why should some other person instantly obtain everything it has taken him a lifetime to build? Where is the justice in that? Then, of course, there is the scarier question. What will happen to everything he has built once he is gone? Will it be put to good use, or will it all be destroyed by a fool who inherits it all?

In countless books on money management, the observation is made, that fortunes are usually made in one generation, they are maintained by the second generation, and they are blown by the third generation. While this is a modern observation, Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes chapter one that there is nothing new under the sun. I wonder if he noted this same observation among the royal families and the aristocrats that he had met over his lifetime.

I wouldn't be surprised if he had. And I wouldn't be surprised if he worried about the third generation who would inherit the wealth that was established by his father David, and sustained and expanded through his reign. If he was worried, he had every right to be. For within a few years after his death, the Bible tells us that Solomon's son, Rehoboam, would lead the kingdom of Israel to ruin. And most of what Solomon, and his father David before him, had laboured for a lifetime to obtain, would be squandered in a fraction of the time it had taken to acquire it all.

While Solomon would not be around to see it happen, the thought that it could happen troubled him greatly. In fact, the Bible tells us that he knew it was going to happen.

In 1 Kings 11 it says, "So the Lord became angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned from the Lord God of Israel ... Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, "Because you have done this, and have not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom away from you and give it to your servant. Nevertheless I will not do it in your days, for the sake of your father David; I will tear it out of the hand of your son."

Knowing that all this was going to happen, Solomon writes with a bitter heart that all his labour had been meaningless. In today's reading he questions why he should work at all, given that none of his labours would endure.

Perhaps you know the feeling. I remember a Padre I once met who complained how he had laboured for five years to build up a faith community only to see his successor undo everything he had done in his first year. I recall reading the disgust of another minister who had laboured hard for forty years in a single parish, only to experience the same thing. When he retired, the new minister came in and in his first year undid everything his predecessor had spent his whole ministry trying to accomplish. And here's the kicker. The new guy claimed he did it all in the name of progress!

In both these cases, the ministers were left wondering, like Solomon, what was the point? Why try and build when you know the next person is going to come in and tear it all down? Why

bother?

We ask these questions to ourselves all the time. Why bother do anything other than the bare minimum at work when there is no opportunity for advancement? Why bother killing ourselves to provide the best for our kids when they often show little appreciation? Why bother helping our neighbour when it is highly unlikely that they will pay us back? Why bother making our bed in the morning when the sheets will be used again in only a matter of hours? Why bother?

As stated in the introduction to this series, when thinking about life, there are two ways we can approach things. We can begin with God and the revelation we have received through the Bible that describes God's nature and God's plans for creation and we can use this foundation to construct our understanding of the world and our experiences in it. Or, we can build our understanding of how the world works starting with ourselves and our experiences of life.

Throughout most of Ecclesiastes, Solomon appears to be in the latter frame of reference. And starting with himself, and his experiences of life as his foundation for evaluating the world, it leads him to a very dark place. This is why Solomon is constantly saying everything is meaningless. We saw it in chapter one when Solomon discussed the cycles of life. We saw it last week when Solomon described the season in his life that was devoted to the pursuit of pleasure. We saw it in our reading today when Solomon reflected on all the work that he had accomplished over his long reign as king of Israel.

In Solomon's mind, it was all meaningless, because his heart had drifted away from God, and as a result, he was making his appraisal of life in all its dimensions with himself as his initial frame of reference. This was the source of his bleak outlook. And should we find ourselves agreeing with his conclusions, it is a good indication that we too are suffering from a similarly distorted perspective.

In response to this distorted way of thinking, the Bible is continually calling us to change our mind. In response to this distorted way of thinking, the Bible is continually calling us to repent.

Here are some of the wrong ways of thinking evident in today's reading that had laid hold of Solomon's mind for which he needed to repent. First, we do not labour for our own glory, we labour for the glory of God. Thus, it does not matter whether our names and accomplishments are remembered by the citizens of earth, a thousand years after we are gone, or even a day after we are gone. We do not labour to build a name for ourselves. That is idolatry.

Instead, all our labour is to be an act of worship unto the Lord our God. If it is, then all of it has great meaning. For even the most menial tasks that we accomplish and that no one ever

sees will be used by God for His redemptive purposes. God does not waste anything. When we view our work from this perspective, we will not grumble and complain and wallow in self pity. Rather, we will be grateful for the honour of serving God and our work will become a source of joy.

Secondly, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. This means that all we have belongs to God. We are mere stewards of the resources that God has entrusted to us. And we are not called to use these resources for selfish ambitions. They are to be used for the benefit of others.

So, why should it matter to us whom God chooses to bless and how? Why should we be concerned about who has the most toys and whether or not that is fair? That is for God to decide. Our calling is to receive the talents that God has given us and deploy them to the best of our ability.

This means that the only response a person can have to the blessings we have received from God, if our heart is in the right place, is gratitude. So, when Solomon, who had been greatly blessed by God with incredible wealth, grumbles that God might bless someone else with those same riches once he was dead...that is just plain wrong! Who is he to question God? And how can he not be grateful with all he had just because the possibility exists that God might bless someone else with more?

Third, the fatalism that consumed Solomon and that manifested itself in today's reading as a lament on the futility of work was not the consequence of a poorly constructed world that lacked justice. No, this fatalism was the product of a heart that had drifted from God on account of numerous sins. In other words, the real problem was not with the world. The real problem was with Solomon. He needed to change himself; not the world.

These are three areas where it is clear that Solomon had erred in his reflection on the meaning of his work in today's Scripture reading. And these are three areas where we all commonly find ourselves stumbling as we make our way through life.

Given how easy it is to embrace the thinking that Solomon expresses in Ecclesiastes, chapter two, we need to be diligent in guarding our hearts and minds from such soul destroying thoughts. Therefore, as we continue about our work, stewarding the resources that God has entrusted to us, may God fill us with a spirit of gratitude. May we recognize the eternal value our work possesses, no matter how insignificant it may seem. May we spend more time trying to change ourselves than changing the world. And as we engage in these actions, may we find that the work that God has called us to do is a life giving source of joy.