

The Pursuit of Riches

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on September 23, 2018

This morning we are turning to the fifth 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. Today's reading is from Ecclesiastes, chapter five, verses ten through fifteen.

Ecclesiastes 5:10-15

10 The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity. 11 When goods increase, those who eat them increase; and what gain has their owner but to see them with his eyes? 12 Sweet is the sleep of laborers, whether they eat little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let them sleep. 13 There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt, 14 and those riches were lost in a bad venture; though they are parents of children, they have nothing in their hands. 15 As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands.

In 1622 the Spanish treasure galleon, "Our Lady of Atocha" was beginning her journey from the Florida Keys on route to Spain. Laden with over a billion dollars of gold, silver, and gems her cargo represented a substantial sum for the Spanish crown.

Unfortunately, for the crown, and for the crew, the Atocha, having missed her departure date by six weeks because of technical challenges arising from having to stow away all that treasure, sailed into a hurricane and sank on September 6, 1622. According to the eyewitness accounts of the few survivors of the wreck, the battered ship endured for a few days before succumbing to the sea.

In those dreadful days before her doom, the priests onboard experienced a once in a lifetime financial bonanza as the hundreds of terrified sailors, with nothing to lose, paid a hansom sum to confess their sins and receive absolution before they died. It was also noted that when the ship finally did break apart, the priests, with their pockets filled with gold, were among the first to sink to the bottom of the ocean.

In our Scripture reading this morning King Solomon reflects on the perils of money and the many ways it can cause God's people to sink. Drawing upon his personal experience, as the world's richest man, as well as his familiarity with many of the world's wealthy, he makes the following observation. In verse ten, he notes, "The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain." This is Solomon's way of saying, "the more you have, the more you want."

And the reason he states this, is because he knew the feeling well. For starting from the day he was born, Solomon was exposed to the good life and had acquired a taste for fine things. This is what happens when you are the son of a king and you grow up in a palace. Long before he took his seat on the throne of Israel, Solomon was being conditioned to expect the best in life.

In other words, while the average citizen of Israel likely had only one set of clothes, Solomon had closets full of colourful robes made from the finest fabrics, by the best tailors in the land; even as a youth. While the average citizen of Israel was nourished with their daily bread, Solomon was fed with the kings' food; eating meat, pastries, and other fine foods on a daily basis that most citizens would never eat in their lifetime. While the average citizen toiled in the field from dawn to dusk, repeating the same routine day in and day out just to produce enough food to meet their basic needs, Solomon spent his time being tutored by the greatest minds, having exposure to art, literature, music, science, politics, religion, and economics. While the average citizen lived in a small house, with a large family, and even animals, Solomon lived in a huge palace filled with marble, gold, fountains, and gardens.

While ninety eight percent of the population lived in extreme poverty, Solomon, was a part of the razor thin minority who lived in luxury; even as a young lad. For him this was normal. He had grown to expect it. He thought he deserved it. And he wanted more.

Thus, by the time he was an old man, his level of consumption, driven by his soul's endless quest for more, had reached a point that made his early days look like they were times of want. And this was a problem. On many different levels.

For starters, Solomon would have noticed, as he owned more and more things, those things began to own him more and more. Perhaps you have experienced the same thing. For example, there are those who dream of the large country lot with the mansion like home and they think to themselves, wouldn't life be grand if I lived in one of those homes. And then, low and behold they get one of those homes and they realize that the grass needs to be cut every week and it takes hours. When fall comes they discover the amount of leaves to be raked and it is horrendous. And now that they live outside of town, they are constantly driving half an hour here and half an hour there for the simplest of things and it is a nightmare. Which only gets worse once they realize they will have to work for the rest of their lives just to pay the property tax bill and the utilities bill on their home. It is then that they realize that the house they own really owns them. And they begin to wonder, maybe I would be happier if I had less.

Now if you think this is bad, imagine you are Solomon, and you have palaces, and summer homes, and stables, with chariots, and horses, and you have seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines and you have so many children that you don't even know who half of them are, but, you have to pay for them all, and everyone on your payroll thinks they deserve bigger

and better, and they have a huge entitlement mentality, and they don't bring in any revenue to the family whatsoever because they are spoiled and lazy and useless....what a mess. And you realize I wish I had a lot less.

This is what Solomon was beginning to realize near the end of his life as he wrote Ecclesiastes. In his old age he realized that the hunger for more that had driven much of his life had left him in a place where his life was burdened by looking after it all, and putting out fires, and trying to keep everyone happy, all the while making sure there was no political coupe being cooked up, like the stunt his brother Absalom nearly pulled off on his father David, or like the stunt his other brother Adonijah tried to pull on him before he ascended to the throne as a young man.

And this is only half the problem. Because actions have consequences. And our bad choices don't just harm us. They harm others. Sometimes for a very long time. In Solomon's case, his bad choices, that were driven by his hunger for more, caused enormous harm to the people whom God had called him to serve.

While Solomon wouldn't be around to see the full extent of the damage he had caused his people, he could see it coming. And there is no doubt in my mind, that this troubled his heart, and prevented him from enjoying the wealth that he had obtained. For even then, I am sure that Solomon knew that his kingdom was not financially viable in the long run and that he had set the nation on a path for ruin. Even as he wrote Ecclesiastes, he knew that the tax burden he was imposing on his people in order to maintain his extravagant lifestyle was too much. Things couldn't last much longer on the current trajectory. This he knew.

But. What do you do to solve the problem? After all, he had already committed to a certain lifestyle, and now that he was fully immersed in it, how could he pull back? As we have noted, Solomon had seven hundred wives, and three hundred concubines, and children, and grand children who all expected to live like royalty. While few of them likely knew how to do an honest day's work, I bet most of them were quite skilled in the dark arts of politics and had developed strategic alliances with key power brokers capable of throwing a wrench in the civic machinery that would bring the nation to a grinding halt on a moment's notice. In that environment it would be impossible for Solomon to be fiscally responsible and cut funding to royal feed trough and survive.

I suspect Solomon's son, Rehoboam, who ascended to the throne upon Solomon's death, also recognized the problem. Indeed he was in a catch twenty two. Either he could cut funding to the court and face a coup d'etat or continue to squeeze blood from a stone and face the wrath of the people. Rehoboam chose the later. And the people revolted. A civil war followed. And the lives of thousands of citizens, whose lives were already hard enough, were filled with even greater suffering. All because Solomon wanted more.

This is why the hunger for riches can be a huge problem. For not only does it create a huge milestone around our necks by turning us into the slaves of our possessions, it also traps us into a lifestyle from which it is impossible to escape; a lifestyle which will guarantee the suffering of people that we love.

This was the experience of Solomon, the richest man in the world in his day. This is the experience that caused him to say in our reading today, “The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.” “Sweet is the sleep of laborers, whether they eat little or much; but the excess of the rich will not let them sleep.”

These words remind me of the words of Jesus, who spoke a lot about money in the gospels. In Matthew, chapter six, he says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. 24 “No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money. In Mark, chapter eight, Jesus says, “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”

In Paul’s epistle to Timothy he writes, “the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content.”

Had Solomon built his life around these words he would have saved himself a lifetime of grief. Had Solomon built his life around these words the history of the nation of Israel would have been very different.

While it is too late for Solomon to reverse the course of his life, the good news for all of us, is we have still have time. And fortunately for us, our relative wealth is not as great as Solomon’s, so we are not as entangled as he was. This means, if we desire to make a change in our lives it will be much easier for us to make a change than it would have been for him.

So, in response to the wisdom that God’s Spirit has imparted to us through the words of Solomon, through the words of Jesus, and through the words of Paul, may God lead us to a place of contentment in our lives. May we seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness. May we store our treasure in heaven and find love, joy, and peace as we rejoice in Christ our Saviour, who has made of children of God, and through whom we possess eternal riches.