

What's Worthy Wealth

Ecclesiastes 2: 15-26

Luke 12: 13-21

We've talked recently about having lots of stuff. I have a wealth of computer parts stored in my garage. If you converted it all into dollars from the time of purchase, it's probably worth thousands. I brought some with me so I could play show and tell. When my wife saw me emerge from the garage with this stuff, she made some unkind remarks laced with some threats.

- A modem card, brand new, never installed, still in its protective anti-static bag. I have about 5 new ones and another half dozen used ones.
- A sound card, one of three brand new ones, never used, and about a dozen used ones.
- A 4 port USB card that may still be use-able, but most machines come with 6-8 ports built-in; I have several of these, new and used.
- A video card; I've got over a dozen of these of all kinds, most of them un-useable.
- A bunch of memory sticks that won't function even on a 10 year old PC; these have a bus speed of 66mhz; my current PC, not new, has a bus speed of 1.3 ghz, about 20xs faster.
- This cute little thing is a cooling fan for the main processor. Cooling fans for today's hot running processors have to be far more powerful and are big, boxy things.
- This is a motherboard for a PC that today wouldn't be able to do much even if you could assemble the parts to make it run, which I believe I could do. I have over a dozen of these.

I have old floppy drives, old monitors, old computer cases, old mice, dozens of power cords, printer cables, and video cables, speakers, hard drives, a few printers, not to mention lots of odd, specialized hardware that I don't even remember what they're good for.

This wealth of computer parts has a present day value of being irksome to my wife and of no cash value beyond the few dollars that a recycler will someday reap from pulling apart components for the metals. While I never intended to make money from this investment, it is a clear example of how we can end up with a wealth that ends up having no real value. Sorting out the difference between wealth and value, and discovering what's worthy wealth, is addressed by today's scriptures.

Ecclesiastes, or "The Teacher," is rather cynical and sour in his views of the things of life, but he does challenge our thinking and aims to push us out of the rut into which life and the world confines us, our thinking and our perceptions. That was his intent for the readers of his day and his universal themes strike a chord even now.

Ecclesiastes is a type of writing called "wisdom literature." Proverbs, Job and a number of the Psalms are also wisdom texts. Wisdom literature deals with basic life issues and expects that when there is "**wisdom**", an awareness of life's truths, that

God's presence and the sacred way are also present. Ecclesiastes, "The Teacher," is trying to define what in life is really worth all the struggle, the toils and pains as well as the fleeting joys and pleasures. He cries, *All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind*. None of it lasts. All that is gained is ultimately going to be lost. A lifetime's investment in wisdom, knowledge and skill is ultimately for naught – as the Teacher says, *a chasing after the wind*.

He notes that the fool and the wise alike die the same and are similarly forgotten before long. What use was the striving of either one? Did the wise gain any reward, any lasting value? What good was his own striving after wisdom? The answer is altogether negative - *for all is vanity and a chasing after wind*.

What about the wealth he had accumulated in a lifetime of toil and labor, using all the wisdom he could acquire? You can't take it with you when you die. You leave the fruit of your labors to someone else. You don't even know if they'll share your wisdom or be total fools. They won't have labored at all to gain it either. So what's the value of all that hard work and accumulation of wealth? Nothing. It's all vanity, serving oneself for a time without anything lasting in the end.

But he tempers his negative, despairing view in the last paragraph. This brief and often difficult life's journey derives **any** meaning **only** from the wisdom, knowledge and happiness, given by God to those faithful and true, who seek God's favor and righteousness. For the sinner, these sacred gifts in wisdom are ignored. The sinner may toil and labor, accumulate and store up, only to surrender it with an unwilling and begrudging spirit to whomever God chooses to receive it. The sinner in his vanity follows the vain and futile to its ultimate end, *a chasing after the wind*. The word "sinner" also means "fool" or "bungler." So, for the Teacher, the sinner has simply made a fool of himself, bungling the chance for meaning in life that could have come from faithfulness to God. So, the Teacher points beyond the worldly eddies of shifting winds and toward the sacred and eternal in God. Within what is sacred is where we find wealth of worth.

Jesus reminds his listeners of the same thing in his parable of the rich fool. It begins with a challenge from a listener in the crowd who is seeking justice, who asks Jesus to tell his brother to share the family inheritance. Jesus denies that his role is to be any kind of judge or mediator over such a dispute, but he uses the challenge to teach a lesson on wealth and values. He warns about greed and says, *one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions ... like computer parts*.

He tells the parable about the rich man whose bumper crop exceeded his capacity to store it all. What to do?

This rich man, or rich *fool* in the terms of Ecclesiastes, has no vision for anything more in his life than his own comfort, security, and happiness. For him, life's true meaning, value and worth is, 'Get all you can, all you want, and then you're set for life.' Blessed with a rich harvest, the rich fool thinks only of himself. He has made *gracious abundance* into a *personal problem* instead of an opportunity for joyous blessing.

He decides to tear down his existing silos and build bigger ones to hold all of the harvest. He has a satisfying conversation with himself: *I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'*

Notice that in the parable, he speaks only with himself. Who else matters? The measure of wealth is what you've got, right? That's the way the world works. That seems like the success of wisdom to the rich fool until God speaks, and interrupts his happy internal dialogue.

As you see, there's a nasty surprise at the end of the tale. God tells him: *You fool! This very night your life is being demanded from you. Then who will get the things you have prepared for yourself?* His sudden death robs the rich fool of his self-made glory and self-styled salvation. His life's striving is all at once trivialized and negated by his death.

People of faith are challenged like everyone else to make sense out of our life's journey. We may be led to the negative, despairing view of the Teacher, being reminded that he turns us toward God and the sacred to find true wealth of value and meaning. Ecclesiastes points us beyond the wind's driven, striving emptiness and toward the sacred and eternal. What does the Teacher say again? *To the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy.*

For Ecclesiastes, it is wisdom that is to be cherished above all else. Yet in his dour teaching, where everything in life is dismissed as passing and vain, *chasing after the wind*, it's difficult to discern how wisdom has value, or even what it is. Of course, wisdom allows its bearer to distinguish what is worthy and what is vanity, what is true from what is false, and what is good and righteous from what is corrupt and sinful. Truly, Ecclesiastes is one of those books that barely belongs in the Bible because its contribution to the understanding of God and God's will and purpose is almost nil.

A rare few thin rays of light illuminate his thinking with something positive and actually instructive. One passage that may ring familiar begins chapter 11: *Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will gain it again. Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.* On one hand, it's an investment strategy, but underlying the proverb is recognition that letting go and risking in faith on another path is a worthwhile thing to do.

He goes further to suggest that seven, or even eight such "castings" would be advisable as a hedge against hard times that may come anytime. He realizes that sharing the wealth with others is a way of making it, acknowledging mutual dependence and a faithful trust where all may benefit. It seems to emphasize the importance of community and our shared journey. Unlike the rich fool in Jesus' parable who thinks and even speaks only to himself, Ecclesiastes would agree that such attitude and conduct is foolish. The Teacher admits the value of community, identifying a rich vein of wealth that's shared and mutual, not singular, exclusive to one alone.

Jesus wants us to be aware of what has true, lasting value, to know what wealth truly consists of, and measure our life's wealth, value and meaning on those terms. The rich fool grasped none of this. Jesus, like Ecclesiastes, points us beyond the wind's driven emptiness and toward the sacred and eternal. What does the Teacher say again? *To the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy.*

What does Jesus want us to find? The sacred and spiritual, the true and lasting. He wants us to discover the wealth of the Kingdom along his servant path. That servant path **begins** in recognizing our shared journey with others, how we need each other to make things really happen, and how we truly benefit **and** give blessing.

True wealth is not simply acquired, but discovered in the works and lives of others with whom we are willing to labor together. By acts of thoughtfulness, of sacrifice, of devotion, we're given something powerful for our lives from others, and a blessing in like manner for us to extend to others. We're blessed in order to share blessings.

Sacred wisdom offers a measure of worthy wealth. Sacred wisdom says a sincere act of charity is worth more than a big screen TV. Compassion is worth more than a Porsche. A yacht can't get you justice. A private jet doesn't get you peace. A seat on the stock exchange won't gain you freedom. All of the money in the world can't buy you a life with any meaning. What really has value is sacred, and it's stored up like treasure in heaven.

Our charge in this life is to carry the baton of sacred wisdom, faithfully and even foolishly as the world sees it. The sacred must be alive in us, giving a life's witness that faith in God and Christ – 'the fool's errand,' not the world's wisdom – is actually our highest and truest achievement in life. We can reveal the lasting transcendent, a mystery and a force that the wind cannot claim and carry away. Such treasure is kept in heaven.

We're called to step out of the wind's flow and to see above and beyond the debris that it swirls around us. May we touch the sacred, sharing with gratitude and grace. That's what it's all about. The Teacher was right after all; everything else is vanity and *chasing after the wind.*