

Work and Worth

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2: 18-23

Luke: 12: 13-21

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2: 18-23

The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ²Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. ¹²I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, ¹³applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. ¹⁴I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. ⁸I 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. ²⁰So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, ²¹because 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. ²²What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? ²³For 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.

Luke: 12: 13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

In the opening scene of *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye, a poor Jewish milkman with five daughters, explains the customs of the Jews in the Russian village of Anatevka, where their lives are as precarious as the perch of a fiddler on a roof. Tevye is delivering milk, and has to pull the cart himself, as his horse is lame. He asks God: Who would it hurt "If I were a rich man, would it spoil some vast eternal plan if I were a wealthy man?"

Tevye outlines his dream of wealth to God and acknowledges that while it's no great shame to be poor, it is no honor either. After all, if he were wealthy he wouldn't have to work so hard, his wife would be spoiled, and he'd be an important and wise man in town. Like anyone else with a fantasy of wealth, Tevye imagines a grand scale of things, a big tall house with rooms by the dozen, a staircase that leads nowhere, and geese and chickens and ducks squawking everywhere just for the town to see and to hear. But even greater than that, Tevye shares with

God just what he would do with his newfound free time. “If I were rich, I’d have the time that I lack to sit in the synagogue and pray and maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall. And I’d discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day. That would be the sweetest thing of all if I were a rich man.

The sweetest thing of all would be to spend time with God; that is what is at the heart of Tevye’s desire to be wealthy, to have the time for prayer and study and worship. The property and the possessions and the savings and the respect are all wonderful, but not as important, not as sweet, as time with God. That is true wealth.

Tevye understood Solomon’s pragmatic, cynical words in the book of Ecclesiastes. Wisdom, pleasure, toil, advancement and riches are after a point all just meaningless. All that labor and sweat may create wealth and happiness for others, whether they use good judgement or are foolish and undeserving. Or, as Jesus spoke about in his parable, all of that toil may only lead to a greedy feud between those who inherit, or to those who stockpile and hoard for their own personal wishes. Jesus does not speak against doing well, or having possessions, but rather to be on guard for the attitude we have regarding our abundance. Jesus calls to recognize and to remember that abundance and prosperity come with responsibilities.

In the time of Jesus’ earthly life, just as in the early 20th century setting of Anateyka, wealth and abundance meant having a few changes of clothes, a few work animals, enough food to eat and some property—what we would today call the basics, or minimalist living.

No matter what we have, at some point God will say, “This very night your life is being demanded of you.”

Your life is being demanded of you. Tonight. Yes, tonight. What an anxiety-producing, intimidating thought. We quickly wonder if we have been valuing the wrong things, and if we really did do the right things. That little phrase captures the tone of the whole parable, and the words of Solomon too—Be. On. Guard. Do not blindly go along working so that status and possessions and benefits are idolized. Do not labor so intently that you neglect your loved ones and yourself. Do not toil without time to be with God.

The Episcopal Rector J. Barrington Bates offers a far less intimidating insight to the life that God will and does demand of us, as he sees this as an invitation to life, not a message of death. He wrote, “there are various ways your life can be demanded. One way your life can be demanded is for you to forfeit it—to give it up. But another way your life can be demanded of you is for you to live it to the fullest.”

To live it to the fullest.

With that understanding of having your life demanded of you, that life is to be lived to the fullest, we are offered a whole new insight into value and labor, into wealth and sharing, into saving and possessing, into work and worth.

Whatever we earn, acquire, hold and receive does not identify us as much as it is what we do with it. Our true identity is a child of God who gives back to God and to the world in whatever ways we are able and capable. For some that is through monetary support, some through the gift of volunteer time for a passionate cause, some through the gifts of prayer, presence and support.

Living life to the fullest means not being attentive to what we are lacking, or that our material efforts and gains may go to an undeserving inheritor, but rather to see the abundance of blessings all around us. Life is more than just what we can hold in our hands or our accounts or on our shelves. Instead what is most important and valuable in a life lived to the fullest are the intangibles of faith, love generosity, forgiveness, humility, hospitality, peace and kindness and

the ways we incorporate them into our work, our play, our rest, our family, our friendships and with others we may never even really know. This is how we respond to Jesus' call to be rich towards God. This is living life to its fullest.

Storing up our treasures has a logical and responsible place in our lives, but our real value as beloved children of God is what we give by living into our faith. We save and plan as we are able for our future as we anticipate financial, home, legal, medical and personal needs. This is a responsibility that we have and is the logical thing to do. Faith teaches and reminds us though that things do not satisfy our longing for meaning and purpose. Work is not just a means to an end but is the use of our God-given gifts and skills to support ourselves and share with others.

One of my favorite quotes is from Winston Churchill, "We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give." This is the essential balance of our own responsibilities with the faithful action of living on guard to be rich towards God.

Living into our relationship with God, knowing that our lives belong to Christ, finding energy and renewal through the Spirit, that is living our life to the fullest and that is the sweetest thing of all. Amen.