

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost

October 17, 2021

Psalm 119:9–16 (ESV):

9 How can a young man keep his way pure?

By guarding it according to your word.

10 With my whole heart I seek you;

let me not wander from your commandments!

11 I have stored up your word in my heart,

that I might not sin against you.

12 Blessed are you, O LORD;

teach me your statutes!

13 With my lips I declare

all the rules of your mouth.

14 In the way of your testimonies I delight

as much as in all riches.

15 I will meditate on your precepts

and fix my eyes on your ways.

16 I will delight in your statutes;

I will not forget your word.

First Reading: Ecclesiastes 5:10–20 (ESV):

10 He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. 11 When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? 12 Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.

13 There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, 14 and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. 15 As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand.

16 This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to

him who toils for the wind? 17 Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.

18 Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. 19 Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. 20 For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

EPISTLE: Hebrews 4:1–16 (ESV):

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. 2 For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. 3 For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said,

“As I swore in my wrath,
‘They shall not enter my rest,’ ”

although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. 4 For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” 5 And again in this passage he said,

“They shall not enter my rest.”

6 Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, 7 again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”

8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. 9 So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, 10 for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

11 Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. 12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Jesus the Great High Priest

14 Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

THE GOSPEL - Mark 10:23–31 (ESV):

23 And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” **24** And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! **25** It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” **26** And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?” **27** Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.” **28** Peter began to say to him, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” **29** Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, **30** who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. **31** But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Sermon 42 – Twenty-first Sunday After Pentecost

“Life is the Disease”

Ecclesiastes 5:10-20

Dear friends,

Our Old Testament lesson is from the Book of Ecclesiastes, and I want to go beyond the basics here. The Bible always has more to teach us than we could ever learn, but we

can learn from it, the task isn't hopeless. Sometimes you have to come at things from a different way. This section of the book is very clearly about money, and it fits nicely and neatly in with the Gospel lesson, and with the common wisdom that you and I have shared with each other many times over the years. Money and the things you own will not make you happy. Striving for money isn't, in the end, going to get you anything. That's simple, we've all heard people say it, we've all seen examples of it. But I don't think that's what this is saying. You can learn that lesson from these words, but I want to see what else we can learn, and to challenge some of our presuppositions about readings like this. I am going to say this is not about money being unsatisfying, this is not about money is the problem. In fact, I dare to say this passage isn't about money at all. This passage instead is dealing with life itself, how it goes, where it ends up, and how we can cope with it in this earth.

Ecclesiastes doesn't have a name attached to it. The guy who writes this introduces himself as the Teacher, that's what he calls himself, but we've long long since thought that this book was written by King Solomon of Israel, probably near the end of his long eventful life. This book is quite straightforward, King Solomon talks bluntly about his life and he is reflecting on all he did and all he tried to do, and he's asking himself the question, what was it all for? What did it get me in the end? He's testing everything he'd tried to do and seeing if it measures up to what he expected. At the end of his life, Solomon wants to figure out what the point of life is. Why do life? What's good about it, what's bad about it, how does it measure up? Life doesn't make sense sometimes, and Solomon is wrestling with this head-on.

“10 He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.” Again, it is very easy to read this in the way that we expect to read it. Aha! Solomon is telling you that money cannot make you happy. He's saying that when you devote your life to money, this is vanity! I don't think that's what he's saying. Solomon isn't lecturing you, telling you that money can't make you happy. Instead, Solomon is frustrated, saying, I have all this money, I have all this stuff, and it should make my life better, but it doesn't. It hasn't done what I wanted. He's saying this wrong. It shouldn't be this way. If you have lots of money, lots of stuff, it should make your life better, but it doesn't. Why?

“11 When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes?” This is kind of a strange sentence to read aloud, but what he's saying is simple. He's saying, the more money you have, the more

problems you have. The more stuff you have, the more you need to work to maintain it. Remember, riches in those days were a little different. Solomon was a king, yes, but being a king in those days meant having to feed lots of people. If no one works on your farms, you don't get much of a harvest. The more money he made, the more work he made for himself. The bigger his farms, the more hired help he needed to pay. I increased my goods, Solomon says, but now I've got to pay people to keep that stuff up for me. It isn't getting me ahead it isn't getting me anywhere. All I can do is see them with my eyes. I can look at my stuff, my money, but I can't enjoy it. That is what Solomon is saying is evil.

Do you see? Solomon is rich beyond imagination, but his wealth has just created new problems for him. He says this is dumb, it shouldn't be this way, and I think most of us would agree, deep down. When you don't have enough money, it can cause endless problems. With your spouse, your kids, your father and mother. When you can't pay the bills it is hard, it is stressful, because there's no safety, everyone fights over what little there is, we worry about what we're teaching our kids or leaving our kids. It always seems like if we had a little more, we could finally relax, things would be better. Solomon isn't shaming us for thinking this, he's agreeing with us that this is the way it should be. If you have more money, it should make you feel safer, make your life better, and it doesn't, and that's stupid.

“12 Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.” Laborers were paid by the day back then. You made enough for the day, you went to sleep, then you started the whole cycle over again the next day. Daily bread. Solomon says, I have enough to last me months, years, not days, and the ones that don't know where they'll get tomorrow's paycheck are sleeping better than me. That's unfair, that's awful.

“13 There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, 14 and those riches were lost in a bad venture.” No matter how hard you hold onto what you have, you can lose it, and it shouldn't be that way. You make the wrong investment, make a bad call on a gamble, and it all goes away. Solomon is angry at this. It shouldn't be that way. You and I can sympathize with this. We can lose it all, and it doesn't have to be our fault. If the banks fail, the economy tanks, or the company we invest in does something dumb, we can lose all we've gained. In a heartbeat, because of someone else's mistakes, it's gone. **“16 This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? 17 Moreover, all his**

days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.” You can't take it with you when you die, and it doesn't help you now. This is wrong.

So is Solomon just complaining? Whining about the way things are? I don't think so. Solomon is reminding you, reminding all of us, that the world is a pretty bad place and it plays by some pretty bad rules. What makes perfect sense doesn't work out that way. It makes perfect sense that the more money you have, the more you should be able to enjoy life, but the opposite is true. It just doesn't work out like we expect, and that is life, and that is pretty awful. It is a grievous evil, Solomon says. It's wrong it doesn't work out. I want you to think about this, because we're all in danger of doing it. Maybe its about money, maybe its about something else, but life was always going to be frustrating and inexplicable. This world is not run on the rules of what makes sense or what is right. It never will be. Instead, this world is backwards. The more you have, the worse off you are. The evil are successful and praised, and the poor are stepped on.

Do you see what Solomon is doing? He's not lecturing us on morality, he's reflecting on what sin has turned the world into. He's banging his head against a wall because for all his money, for all his power, for all his stuff, he can't change the world. He can't change the rules. He can't change the way that everything gets all messed up and backwards. He can't make it right. He is king of the most powerful nation in the Middle-east at the time, and he cannot make the world make sense.

Solomon powerfully shows us what we've made the world into. We've made the world into this, a place where there is no justice, things don't often turn out the way we expect, where we can lose everything we've invested in in a heartbeat without doing anything wrong. And even when things go smoothly, there's always that nagging voice in the back of our heads, telling us we could lose it all. We can't even recognize peace, comfort, and quiet when God gives us these things.

“18 Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot.” Solomon comes to a truth here. It isn't about how much money or how little. It isn't about what you do or don't do. We have what we're given, our work and our daily bread, and if we can find a way to enjoy that, that is a good thing. He isn't telling us to be poor or rich. He isn't telling us to sell our possessions or live a life of luxury. He's telling us, what you have is what you got, and what you have is from God, find a way to be at peace with that. **“19 Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in**

his toil—this is the gift of God. 20 For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.”

It is God who gives, whether it be little or much, and recognizing that, is the true gift of God. That whole idea of contentment Paul talks about. Recognizing God as God, and what He gives as the gifts that He gives. This idea drives me crazy because it seems like we can't have aspirations, we can't want better, and if we want better we're somehow greedy or unworthy or something. What you have might change, but the attitude, the perspective, the understanding that God is God, that this world is full of sin, that no matter how hard we try, we'll never make it perfect. We might not even make it better. It will be what it will be.

What does Jesus have to do with any of this? This is the question that I'm left with. I truly don't know. Jesus teaches us many of the same things for sure, and it helps us be content with what we have to know that Jesus has made it better for us. He has made heaven for us, where things will make sense, where there will be justice and peace, for real, eternally. That is the best way I can think to summarize this. It's not about what you have, my dear Christian friends. It's not about what you lost, either, even if you've lost a lot. We think that if this or that thing goes just the right way, then we can relax, then we can be okay, but there's always another thing. Whether you have much, whether you have little, whether you're happy or sad, whether you have good times or bad, life is what it is, and life is rotten. Instead of worrying about that, instead of getting frustrated by that, let us all try to emulate what Solomon tells us here. It'll never be okay. It'll never be what we want it to be. Let it just be what it is instead, and let's take whatever enjoyment we can from it. God does not want us miserable, and God does not want us in love with the world either, God wants us to remember that we're pilgrims. We're His children and we're going home someday. Until we do, we work here, so let's take what we can from it.

Amen.