

*A sermon delivered by The Rev. Ronald W. Botts, Minister for Pastoral Care, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 5, 2007, 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time and dedicated to the glory of God!*

## **“This Is the Life!”**

### **Ecclesiastes 2:1-11; Luke 12:13-21**

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*Let us pray: O God, may your Word speak to our hearts today.  
Amen.*

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There's something very special about taking a vacation near water, probably even more so for those of us who live far from a lake or the sea. The Ohio flatlands have a certain beauty. There's an attractiveness to the neighborhoods where most of us live. But when you walk along a beach just after sunrise, feel the cool water on your legs, see the vast expanse of the ocean that rises to meet the sky, experience an invigorating breeze which tosses your hair and rustles your shirt - now that is something to behold.

The British writer, John Masefield, left a poem that he entitled "Sea Fever." It's one that I always liked to include when I taught English literature. It goes like this:

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and sky,  
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,  
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's  
shaking,  
And a grey mist on the sea's face and a grey dawn breaking.

I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide  
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;

And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,  
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the seagulls  
crying.

I must go down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,  
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a  
whetted knife.

And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow rover,  
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.

Well, I'm ready to go. How about you?

Actually, by this time next week I will be at Oak Island, North Carolina, and I'll be sitting out on the porch overlooking Caswell Beach. In the early morning, I'll have a cup of English breakfast tea at hand, and probably a cinnamon Danish. A book or two will be waiting to be picked up and I'll be dressed very comfortably.

It seems to me that there is a time for fun, a place for pleasure. One way to look at a vacation is to consider it a practical necessity. We need some space away from our normal routines, even our regular places of being, if we are to do our best all the rest of the time. Probably the most healthy person is he who works hard, but knows when and how to rest.

The pursuit of pleasure, in all its different forms, is among our strongest motivators in life. The Old Testament lesson today from Ecclesiastes raises this particular issue; in fact, the whole book pursues that question.

The writer of Ecclesiastes, obviously a person of some means, sets out to see how much pleasure can be crammed into one life. He is going to test out the common theory that if a little bit of enjoyment is good, then a lot of it will be even better.

So he eats and drinks unsparingly. He builds himself great houses, with spacious grounds. He surrounds himself with the finest of household furnishings and jewelry to adorn his body. He hires people to sing and amuse him. He pursues all the delights of the flesh. He says, “Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure....”

We could simply relegate this story to the distant past from which it originates, but that would miss the point that this is the story of modern man and modern woman as well. Thematically, it is picked up by Jesus in our parable this morning about the prosperous farmer. In fact, the farmer’s bounty is so great that it becomes his problem.

When the harvest produces more than he has room to store it, the farmer concludes that what he must do is to build bigger barns. The payoff for his work and investment is that these new superstructures will allow him to gather everything the land will produce, now and in the years ahead, so that his future as a rich man will be assured. He’ll have all the assets he will need to live the good life, without a worry or care, or as he puts it, to “take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”

The bottom line of this story is really about security, and it still speaks to us because this is such a universal concern. It’s part of our human makeup that when our security is in doubt, we become anxious. Providing for our needs, and our desires, takes more time than we may think. Jesus would never deny the importance of security in a person’s life, but he redefines where it is to be found.

In the story that Christ tells, the farmer is consumed by himself. Everything revolves around him. Possessive pronouns abound. He refers to **my** crops, **my** barns, **my** grain, **my** goods. No one else’s needs enter the picture. He has it all figured out to his advantage and can now sit back and enjoy the spoils. But then God says to

him, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” I guess maybe he didn’t consider that in his planning.

We may think that this man is very unlike us, but then a good parable keeps drawing us in. It holds up a mirror and forces us to take a look at the person who is there staring back at us. In what ways might we be like the prosperous farmer? Are we tempted to think, as well, that the things we own are the defining marks of happiness? Or might it be a title appended to our name? How about the accomplishments listed in our resume or even the power we wield? Most anything in life could convince us that it is our primary security and meaning.

In Ecclesiastes, the writer concludes that “all is vanity and a chasing after [the] wind.” Through all his attempts to put together a life of non-stop enjoyment, he finally comes to the realization that there is ultimately nothing to be gained through such pursuit.

I remember seeing a family interviewed after one of those devastating wildfires in California. Their home had just gone up in flames and the interviewer asked one of those insensitive questions like, “How do you feel?” What struck me was the answer the woman gave as she stood there with her husband and children. She said, “That was a house. This is our family and we’re OK. That’s all that matters.”

Another man just stared at the ruins of his place, admitting perhaps more than he knew when he said, “I am a free man now.” There is a point where our possessions can come to possess us, our need for power can make us weak, our satisfactions can never be met. And all of this Jesus knew and understood.

Conventional wisdom tells us the more we have, the happier we’ll be. Madison Avenue reinforces this upon us hundreds or even thousands of times a day. We spend lots of money chasing after

pleasure, but we're often disappointed by the results. So we can easily get pulled into a vicious cycle that says if a \$40,000 car doesn't make us feel good, then perhaps our next one should be \$60,000. You get the idea.

There's nothing inherently evil with a plasma TV or a new couch or even a comfortable residence to put them in. Almost no things in life are bad intrinsically, except for chocolate - which we know is sinful. It's the place we give things, what we have to do to obtain them, the cost we have to pay in order to maintain them, that is the rub. The consequence is that while we're engaged in all these dead-ends, we're delayed or diverted from finding the way that *will* truly lead us to what we've been searching for all along.

**In the end, the writer of Ecclesiastes concludes, "the lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth with gain." Jesus directs us to a deeper understanding of life, which is built on relationships with each other and with God. "Take care," he says, "Be aware of how greed can distort your living, for a person's life isn't measured by the abundance of possessions."**

Ten days ago our member and friend Randy Yontz died. He had been in our prayers for months as he struggled against the effects of cancer. Just 55, Randy passed from this life as one of the richest men I have ever known. No, I don't know about his bank accounts and such; but I watched over time how Debbie and his sons, Brian and Danny, shared these precious days with him. They gave him the gift of their love in a most extraordinary way. Randy returned this love to them as well, even as his body continued to weaken. When he died he was lifted toward heaven by his own faith and by the embrace of his family.

You see, in God's kingdom poor is rich, giving is receiving, and divesting is acquiring. Everything else is upside-down. The most important lesson of life that Jesus taught us is to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. All the rest flows outward from this core. When these two dimensions of love are at the center of our being, our security is built on a solid base which lasts beyond the vagaries of daily living.

Here, and only here, will we will find the real pleasures of life and an inner serenity that we long for so much. Everything else is just "chasing after the wind."