

8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 8.3.25

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

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied 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 humans to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun, and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to my successor, and who knows whether he will be wise or foolish? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because 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. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For 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.” (434)

Go with me on this because, the thing is, I like teasing. I like dishing it out. I like taking it. An incisive comment about me, if it lands right, can have me laughing for the rest of the day, while also understanding anew.

That said, an incisive comment about me, if it lands on a tender spot, can have me wounded for the week and sort of resenting the thing I might have learned. So, I get the risk.

I could be wrong here, and it can be taken too far, of course. Teasing: if this is your only mode of communication, if this is the only way you ever call out the frustrating or the absurd, it’s tiresome.

Or if it comes from a place more critical than appreciative, and certainly if it comes from a place more cruel than fond, it’s lost its playfulness.

And it’s something you develop as you mature. Kids teasing other kids can look downright mean because most haven’t figured out where the line is between just enough and too much.

It was many years ago now that Decher Keltner wrote the article, “In Defense of Teasing,” in *The New York Times*, 2008. It came out when Jesse and I were eight years into our marriage but just a couple years into being parents, Tobias then four years old and Jack two. It was a time when our different attitudes about teasing were becoming clear. I’d grown up with it, Jesse hadn’t, which made my teasing at times cut deeper than I intended, way deeper. I’d mean just to crack the air not to break the skin. Because we were tired almost all the time, and we were settling into new and some very intense family dynamics, and I couldn’t let teasing go. As a way to negotiate all the seriousness and high stakes, it was too long a habit and too effective a release.

Dr. Keltner’s article came out just in time.

He explained the challenge of what we were up against.

In noting how much of our common life has become a “zero-tolerance zone for teasing,” he wrote: “The reason teasing is viewed as inherently damaging is that it is too often confused with bullying. But bullying is something different; it’s aggression, pure and simple. Bullies steal, punch, kick, harass and humiliate. Sexual harassers grope, leer and make crude, often threatening passes. They’re pretty ineffectual flirts.” All things we know so painfully these days.

By contrast, Dr. Keltner writes, “...teasing is a mode of play, no doubt with a sharp edge, in which we provoke to negotiate life’s ambiguities and conflicts. And it is essential to making us fully human.”

He goes on to point out “...the centrality of teasing in our social evolution...[which] is suggested by just how pervasive teasing is in the animal world. Younger monkeys pull the tails of older monkeys. African hunting dogs jump all over one another, much like pad-slapping, joking football players moments before kickoff. In every corner of the world, human adults play peekaboo games to stir a sulking child, children (as early as age 1) mimic nearby adults, and teenagers prod one another to gauge romantic interest.”

And he claims that, “...in rejecting teasing, we may be losing something vital and necessary to our identity as the most playful of species” yet a species also made to endure a certain consciousness of how the world is, so often is, disappointing, painful, unjust, absurd. Heartbreaking. Toilsome. It can be so toilsome. And all for what? See, we know these things. So, teasing at such things, giving a go at having a laugh: it can help.

I think Jesus was teasing here; I simply don’t know how else to read this encounter. I think Jesus was teasing this man whose concern was laughable, his concern and his request of Jesus

about that concern: laughable, though the man likely didn't think so, at least not at first. "Tell my brother to share the inheritance with me!"

We're on our way to Jerusalem. It comes early in Luke's gospel. Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem early in the narrative, this city that will be his end. It is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside Jerusalem, Jesus even says at the very moment in the story he's said to make this turn. Meaning he knows what will happen to him once he gets there. Meaning this is indeed the reason he's going. To confront the power structure, to confront political expediency with a more human-scale truth, to confront what's good enough with what's actually truly good.

And this deadline he's now facing will press itself upon him. The work he's to do will more and more need to be done with this end date before him, closing in on him. He needs to generate a people to continue in this building up of the kingdom of heaven in our midst even after he has gone. He needs to gather thought and action that will continue amidst history to be the kingdom of God come near even after he has been crucified and raised and then ascended to heaven. He's got a lot to do and a lot less time than it could take to do it. To change the world. To redeem the world, or at least to get the redemptive rolling, unfurling.

We'll hear this urgency in the parables he'll tell as the days grow short. This gospel narrative that begins so sweetly, with the nativity narratives, will end pointedly, with parables pointing very much in the hearer's direction. He'll provoke his own end. (Not to blame the victim.)

And on his journey to Jerusalem, people will approach. They'll need healing. They'll need restoration and recovery and liberation from possession. Crowds will press in on him and voices will rise from the crowds with urgent requests.

And then there's this guy.

This guy: "Teacher!" he yells from the crowd. "Teacher, tell my brother to share his inheritance with me!"

It's not the most urgent request. A first world problem, we might call it today, a little indulgent, like as if he'd heard Jesus was coming near and people were coming out with all sorts of requests of him and he, having none of much urgency, decided to give a try about this one thing. "Teacher, tell my brother to share!"

Because there's really no question here. Torah, the Jewish Law, clearly spells out how the matter of inheritance is to be handled. It specifies the way to divide wealth among survivors of a deceased relative, the proper line of inheritance, and several prohibitions as to who must not

inherit and how wealth is not to be distributed. And, yes, Jesus has by his very presence called into question much of what was legal custom in his day. And, yes, it's possible something unjust was unfolding between these two brothers. Still, it's a reach to assume Jesus would intervene to someone so unknown to him, arbitration between a pair of bickering brothers among whom money seems to be the biggest thing at stake—or seems at least to this one of the pair. Jesus asks, “Who set me to be the judge and arbitrator among you?”

He then addresses the crowd here with a serious word of warning of what was truly at stake: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” The parable he tells, though, that follows this warning: it's sort of ridiculous. A man who only has with wealth to think about and only has himself to consider, indeed only has himself to speak to: “So, I will say to my soul, ‘Soul...’”

Jesus actually says that. He actually pulls that bit. Bill Cosby made it famous in the 70s in his standup comedy and the record albums he released of his standup (Bill Cosby in the before-we-knew days). “So, I said to myself, ‘Self...’” That's Bill Cosby. But before him, Jesus worked the bit: “So I will say to my soul, ‘Soul...’”

That self-address comes later in the parable, but the setup is just as ridiculous. The man's land has produced abundantly, and this abundance proves a problem. It has the man thinking to himself. The story notes that he thought to himself, which has become a common phrase in our popular rhetoric but which bugs me because it's ridiculous because to whom else can you think? But just so, according to Jesus of this man, he thought to himself, “What should *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops?”

This is a man very much alone in the world, tragic unless sketched this way to be teasing, Jesus teasing the man in the crowd who's here among the sick and the desperate because he wants some money, some extra money he doesn't seem much to need, but willing not only to put his relationship with his brother at risk but also to squander this moment of the kingdom of God coming near in Jesus with a what-the-heck class of request.

“Then he said,” Jesus continues, “*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.” Which, a phrase from Scripture, might have been known at least someone wiser: “Eat, drink, and be merry; for tomorrow we die.” Yet this man, neither the one in the parable nor the one about whom the parable is told, seems to know it.

Of course, you might not know it either. You might not know this reference to scripture that Jesus has made here. After all, this is a reference to a line found in the Book of Ecclesiastes which doesn't show up much in church, indeed doesn't at all except for this week, Proper 13 of Ordinary Time. This is the only time in all the three years of the series of readings that this albeit short book from the Wisdom tradition shows up, speaks up. It is indeed the book in which it's professed that the very best we can hope for in this life is to eat, drink, and be merry; for tomorrow we die.

But that's not the worst of it. Here, in Ecclesiastes, we also are reminded that so much of life is but toil and vanity. The gathering of goods, the accumulation of wealth, the collecting of accolades and admiration; these are all among the countless vanities that drive those living this life a bit crazy. The voice of Ecclesiastes is one of resignation, one even of despair, realizing and reminding that many of the things in this life that boast themselves as so valuable, purport to be the very marrow of meaning, are actually but puffery, vanity, illusion, lie. You get the thing you're supposed to want to get and as soon as you have it, you're on to wanting something else. And it can drive you crazy. And make you exhausted. And leave you ultimately filled with but emptiness, sitting on your sofa wondering why you don't really want to do anything: everything feels so effortful while also stupid.

It's not a beloved book, Ecclesiastes isn't. Coming at you with bad news shot straight, it's a downer. Tradition has it that the voice here is King Solomon's, but there's little reason to think this is so. Maybe that was the conceit, though, because it gave a different gloss to what it might feel like to be a king, something common folks might like to consider. Like, maybe even being the king isn't even all that great?

Maybe.

I admit I love this book, but I get why it doesn't come to church that much. And I get why maybe Jesus would try a different tack with this same lesson, something less of resignation, more of teasing? To take it straight, to give an earnest word of warning when someone comes at you with a ridiculous bee in their bonnet: maybe instead tease them into some new understanding...? Maybe make them see their most soul-full concerns really could use some more depth of soul...?

It's hard to hear Jesus as one who might have teased. Dr. Keltner helps to understand why that might be, pointing out that teasing is a sort of off-the-record communication. He writes in that long ago defense of teasing that "...on-record communication is to be taken literally and follows the rules of what the philosopher Paul Grice described as 'cooperative, direct speech': what is said

should be truthful, appropriately informative, on topic and clear. When doctors deliver prognoses about terminal illnesses or financial advisers announce the loss of family fortunes, they adhere to these rules like priests following Scripture.”

Which presents some difficulty, some difficulty when Scripture itself might be quoting someone who’s teasing, whose engaged in the art of off-the-record talk, which Dr, Keltner suggests is what teasing is “...off-record communication, provocative commentary...shrouded in linguistic acts called ‘off-record markers’... [These] suggest the commentary should not be taken literally...” markers like when a character in a story thinks to himself and says to his soul, “Soul...”

I can just imagine Jesus giving this man the side eye, checking in to see if he’s getting the joke, along on the ride of being its butt, and maybe by which seeing he’s got it pretty good and the presence of the kingdom that has come near in Jesus is at this time for someone else’s blessing, that he should step aside and allow grace to touch someone more in desperate need of it for which he might though give thanks and praise.

Because I’m not sure how else to do this. I’m not sure how else to handle all the many layers of concern in life. The scale of suffering in Gaza, for example, dwelling in my heart alongside my own mid-summer ennui. That the turn from July to August, which brings with it different sounds, sounds like summer passing away, while knowing actual people are also these days passing away, passing away in the most desperate and cruel way. There’s a need for irony in all this, a side-eye knowing that what concerns me concerns me and is rightly brought to Jesus in prayer while also knowing that Jesus might ask me to put that aside—though duly noted set it aside—and join in a larger effort to build up the reign of God which some people need at this very moment more than others.

This is hard, this life. It can be heartbreaking, toilsome. It can often seem meaningless or at least something whose meaning doesn’t always match its costs, match its demands.

Duly noted. Such is life. Such even sometimes is my life. Duly noted.

Now let’s get going. We’ve got good news to make real by which to make life all around better.

Thanks be to God.