

Proper 13, Year C

Luke 12:13-21

Did you happen to read the "Peanuts" cartoon in Friday's edition of the *Seattle Times*? It pictured Linus asking Charlie Brown, "What would you say your philosophy is, Charlie Brown?" To which Charlie replies, "The secret of happiness is having three things to look forward to, and nothing to dread!" Charlie smiles, and Linus looks bemused. Then Linus says, "There's a difference between a philosophy and a bumper sticker."

Apart from the funny pages, our newspapers suggest that a great many people live a bumper sticker kind of existence, lives obsessed with the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. In our celebrity-besotted culture, my guess would be that the three things many some titans of industry, politics, and entertainment would look forward to would be money, fame, and power.

The psalm and gospel for today share a concern for the acquisition of riches, whether those possessions be material goods, achievements, or worldly wisdom, the bumper sticker mentality of life. The readings point to the fact that possessions have a symbolic function in human existence. Our acquisitive instinct indicates an awareness of the frailty, the contingency of life and our deep need for security. Possessions---whether wealth, achievement, or wisdom---consistently symbolize for us power and control.

The author of psalm 49 and Jesus in Luke's gospel account are alike in spurning the vanity of human wisdom and labor as if to verify what you and I continue to learn, mark, and inwardly digest: "Hear this, all you peoples," writes the psalmist. "hearken, all you who dwell in the world, you of high degree and low, rich and poor togetherWe can never ransom ourselves, or deliver to God the price of our life; For the ransom of our life is so great, that we should never have enough to pay it." For all our strivings, it is hubris to think that our accomplishments or our wisdom are sufficient. We do our best; but if we're honest, each of us knows our wisdom is the wisdom of the world. In other words, true wisdom and security belong to another reality of which you and I know next to nothing.

A concern with transcendent wisdom is found in many books of the Bible, not just the psalms and Luke. Other books referred to as the Wisdom Literature include Ecclesiastes, Job, Proverbs, as well as Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon from the Apocrapha. "Then I saw all the work of God," wrote the teacher of Ecclesiastes in his poem, "that no

one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.” As we read prophetic words, we would do well to remember that the Bible is an echo chamber,¹ a text that reverberates with memories. By means of the echo chamber metaphor, we are reminded that the original recipients of the message of Jesus heard ancient resonances which those of us less familiar with biblical language struggle to hear. When Jesus’ disciples heard the words “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you,” they heard echoes of Psalm 49, Ecclesiastes, Job, and especially Proverbs. Assisted by those echoes, they knew that they were the rich fool.

“And [the rich man] thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops.’ And 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.’”

Today you and I are that rich fool: Shall we shore up the work we have accomplished these last months of our lives so that our goals will be preserved? Shall we carefully encase the peak experiences in bigger and better storerooms like treasures to be kept, so they are safe? Shall we hoard all the feelings, so that we never have to let them go?

We want somehow to hold on to everything, to all that we have seen and known here; and we do not want to let it go. We even want to preserve the sense of community we share as a worshipping congregation. We want to guard all the experiences we have known together: the laughing, crying, touching we see in each other’s eyes as we bring our lives to the altar. We want to keep all of that present to our awareness. We want everything to stay the same and never change. Rich Fools that we are, our souls are concentrated in this moment; and they refuse to embrace the pain of a future that is unknown.

You and I know that cannot be. Looking back over our own histories, we know that every peak experience has also been a moment of movement. And if we look honestly, we find that the more concentrated the joy of that experience, the more painful the movement away.

Standing at the peak, trying to hold on, to never let go, is like trying to keep an icy mountain stream from flowing down the side of a ridge with just our hands. It cannot be done. Like the flowing stream, the future is rushing toward us, and we are compelled to act.

¹ Asso. Professor of Old Testament Ellen Davis of Duke Divinity School.

If life is set in this context of the ebb and flow of time, how then are we to speak of the value of human life? How are we to answer the question of the worth of the human spirit? Is it enough to say that for everything there is a season, or is everything vanity?

A revealing article appeared in the *Washington Post* some time ago. The article was about a 78-year-old man who had just graduated from the University of Virginia. Seventy-eight years old, and yet he was receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree. He had begun the degree in the sixties; and, financially unable to continue after alternating enrollment with earning money, money then enrollment, he had left the University to work in the Department of Agriculture until his retirement.

He then spent some time in community service, volunteered for various organizations, even chaired several; but one day, when the season of volunteerism was all used up, he decided the time had come to finish the degree begun so many years ago.

The columnist who wrote the article described the graduate's achievement in these words: "It took a while, but 60 years after Robert Hanson was forced to drop out of school, he proudly walked away from the University of Virginia two weeks ago with a degree...AND HE WON'T EVER USE IT."

"He won't ever use it." The words cut. They lash out at all that validates the strivings of the human spirit; for they suggest the only purpose for the attainment of wisdom is a financial pay-off. They negate the value of intellectual vitality, moral strength, spiritual integrity and growth at every time of life and their potential impact on others. They imply that at best knowledge is for the purpose of maximizing self-interest. These words are what you and I might call "secular" judgments on the worth of human beings; and yet...and yet they reminded me of the experience of another, a woman who was deeply involved in theological judgments on the worth of human beings.

She was attending a conference of members of Commissions on Ministry---laity, deacons, priests, bishops---and at dinner she had shared with the person on her left the excitement of the doctoral studies in which she was engaged. Her dinner partner was the Dean of an Episcopal seminary; and his response to her description of the work she was pursuing was, "Well, you must just be doing it for the love of it, because by the time you finish, you'll be too old to do anything with it." Too old...? Too old to do anything...? She had wanted to respond, "But I'm doing something with it NOW. These studies are enriching my life, my ministry." But she said nothing.

She was 47. But like the 78-year-old graduate of the University of Virginia, she was judged as being out of the mainstream of achievement, as having lost something that having once passed away could never be validated. As chair person of the Commission on Ministry, she knew full well the Church is as beset by age, sex, race, and social discrimination as is secular society; and yet this judgment seemed different. Somehow it was a negation of a human being's capacity to use what he or she knows, a judgment on a man or woman's ability to contribute to the times in which they live, a condemnation as being out of the course of enterprise in which the Church and society move.

Does the Church interpret the Wisdom Literature to mean "out of season, out of service"? Have we joined secular society in promoting power, money, and prestige as the measurements of worth? Have we endorsed the judgment that says of moral, intellectual, and spiritual struggle, "Those are useless pursuits. You'll never be able to DO anything with them?" Is that all we have to say? Is there nothing more to which a faithful Christian can witness than planned obsolescence, erosion of the spirit, and ultimate defeat? Is life that cheap?

The landowner wanted to build larger and larger storehouses to hold those things most dear. Once they were concentrated in a safe place, he could say to his soul: "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry." Rich fool. He hoped to secure to himself an unchanging tomorrow, a static existence, a frozen love. He sought the meaning of life in an objective, external guarantee. He lived as if he were created for the sole purpose of securing his own salvation.

Is that what you and I believe? That the purpose of life is to achieve a mountain called salvation, a peak that will preserve us from failure or difficulty or danger? That the sole purpose of our lives is to save ourselves from loss, to preserve a guarantee, to work and live and worship as if our creation were for our salvation? Or is the voice of the Church heard proclaiming that we are already secure, already saved, and that our salvation is for creation.

Is your creation for salvation, or is your salvation for creation? The question is a watershed, a ridge separating one attitude toward life from another. Faced with that question, we are standing at the crest of a divide and there is no way to stop the water from flowing down one side of the ridge or the other. It is a moment of movement, this peak experience; for we can either move toward the preservation of the past or the uncertainty of the future. But move we must, for we hear a voice saying, "This night your soul is required

of you. I am calling you to leave the things you have prepared, to leave the treasures you have laid up for yourself; I am calling you to embrace a future in which there are no guarantees.”

In everything Jesus says now there is danger for Him and for His followers; for the conflict is not simply between human agents but between spiritual forces. But the hidden strength of the parable of Jesus is celebration of the work of God, celebration not of the setting and content of life but of creation and the movement of life through time. His words are celebrations because they recognize that no single period of life is sufficient for wholeness. Only the very young can live in Eden. Only the young can begin each day afresh, without memory. There is a wonderful view, but a view that will not wear. No flowers of youth, no golden graduation day, no pinnacle of achievement is uniquely valuable. Richness toward God requires ALL of life: the times of keeping and the times of giving away, the times of weeping and the times of laughing, the times of mourning and the times of dancing. All are beautiful in their own time, and all will return to the God who gave them.

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