

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our great teacher,
Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

In the movie “Wall Street” that came out way back in the 1987, the Michael Douglas character made the claim that “Greed is good.” He claimed greed is part of our evolutionary means of progress. He said, greed is the power that drives the survival of the fittest. In the very small context of the corporate world Douglas’ character was addressing, he may have had a point, but Jesus wants his followers to regard money and all material possessions in a different way. Jesus wants His followers to regard manna as blessings we are given from our Heavenly Father to keep us fed, clothed, and sheltered. Jesus wants his followers to share the excess with those less fortunate. For followers of Jesus Christ make no mistake about it, greed is NOT good!

I have to admit this Gospel story isn’t one of my favorites for preaching. I think we all know, as much as we may secretly wish to be like the Michael Douglas character in Wall Street, making Billion dollar deals every day, we all know you can’t lead a happy satisfied life consumed with greed. Any sermon on how bad greed is can have two affects on the people in the congregation. They will feel guilty about their nice things and they will feel angry that the preacher is trying to make them feel guilty about their nice things. Others who literally struggle making ends meet may also be angry with the preacher for overlooking

their plight. Preaching on the 8th Sunday of year C in the Lectionary is lose-lose for the preacher. Where is the Good News here? So, how do you talk about this thing called greed without making enemies from within your own congregation?

I've tried the angle of watering this down by saying, "it's not how much money and stuff you have, but your attitude toward your stuff that Jesus disapproves of." That may be true, but we're still talking about your basic greed... Greed comes from the notion that I'm more important than you, or anyone else, for that matter. It's selfishness at its core. I'm entitled to more and more and more because, well, I'm me... I deserve this because I work hard and I'm entitled to something nice once in a while... Oh, this new thing will make my life easier... There's so many excuses and rationalizations. I know, because I've used them all... Just this past week I justified getting a new tablet so I could have more freedom to do my studies and exegesis for my sermon prep from anywhere at any time. It is nice and it did make my sermon prep more convenient. I can read all my commentaries and look up all the definitions and background information I need from wherever I happen to be at any time, day or night... As convenient as it is to work on the sermon, take notes at meetings, look up information, and keep all my schedule at my fingertips, after I re-read the first lesson I realized it's all vanity. This tablet will be outdated in a year and I'll want a new one again... The book of Ecclesiastes is one of five of the Old Testament Books known as Wisdom

books. These are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is attributed to King Solomon, but most modern scholars say the book is a tribute to King Solomon's wisdom and not actually written by him. As I read through our passage this week I kept being drawn to the word "Vanity." It's used in one form or another 8 times in just 10 verses. In the Hebrew language the Book is written or narrated by a man called Qoheleth or teacher. In today's passage Qoheleth is reflecting on his life of hard work and is trying to find meaning in all his success and accomplishments. He ponders how meaningless it all is when we all must die. He starts out by saying it's all vanity of vanities... I looked up the Hebrew word we have translated as vanity. The Hebrew is the word '*hebel*'. It means vapor or breath. Hold your hand up to your mouth and let out a breath. Can you catch it? Can you save it up for a time when you might need it later? Of course, you can't. One breath in the long life is insignificant. Now imagine if the breath you just let out could have a breath of it's own. How insignificant would that be? That's the real meaning behind the saying "Vanity of Vanities"... It's not about your ego or thinking too much of yourself, but rather about how small and insignificant our lifespan is compared to eternity. We all die and leave whatever we've accumulated or accomplished to the next generation. In faith we trust they will build on what we started, just like we tried to build on the legacy we inherited from our forefathers. The rub comes when we live long enough to see the next

generation tearing down the things we thought were precious... That's when I realize the true insignificance of my accomplishments and my life.

So, how do we follow Jesus and guard against all kinds of greed, which is idolatry? For one thing, I don't believe this lesson from Ecclesiastes and the Gospel lesson about this rich fool coming together, is a coincidence. In the Gospel lesson the Rich Fool used the words I and my 11 times in just 3 verses. Do you think he was just a little bit inwardly focused? Do you think he felt entitled to enjoy the fruits of his labor? After all he earned it and he should be able to do whatever he wants, he's entitled... Do you think he might have had an over inflated view of how important his life was in the grand scheme of things. What if this rich fool viewed his world through the lens of Qoheleth from our first lesson. If he had any grasp of how insignificant he was perhaps he might have thought of something else to do with all the profit from his farming endeavor.

Here's the real reason these lessons for this Sunday in the Revised Common Lectionary aren't among my favs, where's the good news? Everything I read here, if this was all I had to go on, would lead me straight to despair. Ok, I get it. We're all worms and even the most successful of us must still die and don't get to enjoy our stuff forever... If that's all there was to the story, I'd be the first one out that door... Thanks be to God the story doesn't end with the Rich Fool or with Qoheleth. These stories only set the stage. These stories make us hunger and thirst

for something more, something better than this life has to offer. These stories point so clearly to Jesus Christ as the only one who can give joy to life and meaning and purpose to our existence. Jesus life, His death and His resurrection to eternal life give us something to trust in, something to hope for, that lifts us out of and above all the vanity of life. Yes, our earthly life will end. As we have witnessed yet again this weekend with the tragic shootings in El Paso and right here in Dayton last night, life can be snuffed out in a New York minute. Our prayers go out for God to sooth and comfort those who have lost loved ones to that violence. No matter how they died, we miss all our beloved family and friends who have passed. Death is still the great leveler for every one of us, rich or poor we all will face the grim reaper one day. Thanks be to God death isn't the end *for* us or the end *of* us. Because God raised Jesus from the dead and because Jesus lives at God's right hand, we know death doesn't get the last word. Death is nothing but the gateway to eternal life. And that's as Paul Harvey used to say, is the rest of the story...

May you never be persuaded by Hollywood actors or Madison Avenue Admen that greed is good. When the time comes for you to examine your life the way Qoheleth did, may you come away with the realization that, except for Jesus, our lives would be nothing, but the breath of a fleeting breath, nothing but vanity of vanities, nothing but dust in the wind – except for Jesus. May Jesus' life, death

and resurrection be the one thing that gives your life meaning and purpose. May
you put Jesus above *all* else, amen.