

From Vain Vapor to Holy Spirit

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23
Matthew 25:31-40

8 Pentecost 2019
August 4, 2019

“Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” Thus wrote Qoheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes, our first reading. He goes on, **“I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.”** “Vapor” might actually be a better translation of the Hebrew text than “vanity,” but it doesn’t sound as dramatic. Vapor, bad gas, insubstantial puffs of a passing breeze. And there’s more: **“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.”** You hear this? Poor guy! Oh, woe is me! Everything I do is nothing more than passing gas! Do I hear violins?

Forgive me for challenging holy scripture, but I think Qoheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes, though posturing as this wise sage, pontificating on the futility of all human endeavor, is actually a self-centered, bored, rich kid with too much time on his hands. Seriously! He sounds like my elder son when he was 14. **“Whyyyyy do I have to do the dishes? They’re just going to get dirty anyway. Whyyyy do I have to study algebra? I’m never going to use this stuff.”** Sound familiar to any of you all?

It’s okay that I challenge the “wisdom” of Ecclesiastes. Rabbis long before me questioned whether this book should even be included among the sacred writings of the Hebrew Bible. Yet, I am Actually glad that it made the cut – not that it’s deadening despair of all human effort is so uplifting and inspiring, but, if nothing else, it is a mirror of our own darkest selves. It gives voice to the sense of futility that I hear so often, especially from those who do not feel much satisfaction in their work – those who despair that their lives are essentially meaningless – even those who, at the end of the day, regret that they must leave all of their accumulated assets in the hands of people who may not deserve them. What strikes me most about all of these attitudes is the unquestioned conviction that my life is really all about me – my work, my stuff, my joy. Listen to Qoheleth: “I saw, I toiled, I hated, I turned.”

My response to him? So true, O great teacher - if you are the center of your life, then you are right! It is all passing gas, a noxious vapor, vanity of vanities. **But what if** the center of your life is **not you**. What if God has **called you** to give over yourself to something or someone greater than yourself?

Much of the Hebrew Testament sounds that very theme. It’s all about God, not me, not MY accomplishments, not my legacy, not my life. St. Paul goes on to make it clear in his letter to the church in Colossae, **“Set your minds on things that are above,”** admonishes Paul, **“not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”** In baptism, you died to the **“all about me”** life in the flesh. Your life, everything about you, is now hidden with Christ in God. You are free, brothers and sisters, free to give your lives over to something greater than yourselves, free to set your minds in the things that above, eternal, non-futile, and truly meaningful. If you wonder what that means, Jesus gives Paul’s admonition flesh and blood significance. When did we see Christ naked and clothe him? When did we see Christ hungry and thirsty and give him food and drink? When did we see him lonely or imprisoned and visit him? When? Jesus answers, **“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”** That’s when. That’s when you can stop worrying about the meaning of your life – when your life is hidden with God in Christ.

I call upon Glen Scrues, once a beneficiary of Our Brother's Keeper Ministries and now an administrator and minister to share you with you an up close and person story of life found and hope restored through this vital community ministry that we support. Glen