

## **“The Good Life!”**

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

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

August 14, 2016 – 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald W. Botts

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 and rolling hills 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.

Almost every summer we go to Oak Island, North Carolina. In the early morning I sit out on the porch overlooking Caswell Beach. I have a cup of English Breakfast tea at hand, with a cinnamon Danish nearby. A book or two is waiting to be picked up and I am dressed very comfortably. More than thirty years of vacationing on the Atlantic coast has given me some vivid memories and this year is no exception. You may see me here, but in some ways I'm still at the sand and water.

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 really need some space away from our normal routines, our regular places, if we are to be at our best all the rest of the time. Probably the healthiest person is the one who works hard, but knows when and how to relax.

Well, what is the good life? Outside of vacation time, where is it to be found? These are not new questions by any means.

The pursuit of pleasure, in all its different forms, is a strong motivator in life. Our reading today from Ecclesiastes raises this particular issue; in fact, the whole book pursues that question.

The writer, obviously a person of some means, sets out to see how much pleasure can be crammed into one life. He seems determined to test 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 with 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...."

While this may be an old tale, in many ways this is also a modern story 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 his ability to store it, the farmer concludes that he must build bigger barns. With these he will be able to gather in everything the land will produce, now and later. His future as a rich man will then be assured. He'll have all the assets he will need to lead the good life, without a worry or care, or as he puts it, to "take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry."

At its core this parable is 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 wellbeing is in doubt, we become anxious. Providing for our needs, and ensuring our future, takes work. Jesus would not deny the importance of security in a person's life, but here he redefines where it is to be found.

In the story that Jesus tells the farmer thinks only of himself. Everything revolves around him. Possessive pronouns abound. He refers to **my** crops, **my** barns, **my** grain, **my** goods. Only **his** needs are of concern and, with plans to build these new superstructures, he feels he's beat the system and can sit back confidently. 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 a good parable doesn't let us off the hook that easily. It begs the question, in what ways might we be like the prosperous farmer? Are we tempted to think like him that our possessions are the defining marks of happiness? Might it be a title or degree that is attached to our name? How about our accomplishments or the power we wield? Most anything in life can convince us that it is our primary security and meaning.

In Ecclesiastes the writer finally 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 empty pursuit. Any pleasure is fleeting, any happiness is hollow.

This reminds of a family being interviewed after one of those devastating wildfires in California. Their home had just gone up in flames and the TV reporter asks a most insensitive question, "How do you feel?"

What struck me most was the woman's answer as she stood there with her family. She said, "That was a house. This is our family and we're OK. That's all that matters." Another person just stared at the ruins of his place, and then blurted out, "I am a free man now." You see there is a point where our possessions can come to possess us. Jesus understood this.

Conventional wisdom tells us the more we have, the happier we'll be. Madison Avenue reinforces this upon us hundreds of times a day. We spend freely chasing after pleasure, but are often disappointed by the results. We can easily get pulled into thinking that if a \$30,000 car doesn't make us feel good, then perhaps our next one should be \$40,000. You get the idea.

There's nothing inherently evil with a giant TV or a new couch, or even a comfortable house to put them in. Almost no things in life are intrinsically bad, except of course for chocolate—which we all know is sinful. It's the place we give them, what we have to do to obtain them, the cost we have to pay in order to maintain them, that is the rub. Consequently, while we're engaged in pursuing all these dead-ends, we're also diverted from finding the way that will lead to the good life.

In the end the writer of Ecclesiastes concludes that "the lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth with gain." Jesus, knowing this, directs us instead to an understanding of life 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 an abundance of possessions."

I think about this whenever I remember a particular man in one of my former churches who died while I was there. He had been in the congregation's prayers for months as he lived courageously with cancer. Just 55, Randy finally passed from this life as one of the richest men I have ever known.

No, I didn't know anything about his finances; but I watched how his wife and sons shared those precious last months 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 faith but also by the arms of his family and friends. His investment in generous living paid off with a full dividend in the end. You see, in God's kingdom poor is rich, giving is receiving, and divesting is acquiring. Everything else is upside-down. We have to take care lest we are tempted by the world's standards as to how we order our living, and by the world's definitions as a measurement of success.

A most important lesson that Jesus taught us is to love God and to love others as ourselves. Everything else flows outward from this core. When these two aspects of love are at the center of our being, then our security is built on a solid base. That foundation will support us through all the ups and downs of life. When we understand what is truly important, we will find the real pleasures of living and discover the real security that we long for.

What is the good life and where is it to be found? Jesus points us to the right answer, and even offers to show us the way.