

Things Change—8th Sunday after Pentecost

Click [here](#) to watch on Facebook!

[Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23](#)

[Psalm 49:1-12](#)

[Colossians 3:1-11](#)

[Luke 12:13-21](#)

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

If you want a quick summary of this morning's lessons, it's this: things change. And the greatest change that most anyone can think of, is death.

The mercurial author of the Biblical book we call Ecclesiastes, whose name, he says, is "teacher," or the "gatherer of sentences," he says death takes away our wisdom, and our hard work, and renders everything we know as vanity. Or, a more literal translation would say: in the end all things are just hot air, just a breath, ungraspable. Our wealth falls through our fingers, and the fingers of those to whom we leave it. This church building, someday will not stand any longer. This nation, too, is not eternal. The land is changing, the climate is changing.

The author of the Psalm this morning also says the same. It doesn't matter who you are, no one can stave off the ultimate change—"We see that the wise die also;" he writes, "like the dull and stupid they perish. And leave their wealth to those who come after them."

Now, Jesus in Luke teaches the same. And as Jesus usually does, he teaches with a story to grab our attention: a well-off man, doing what any sensible person would do. When your crops are growing well, you store your produce. When your salary is high, you invest. When your investments do well, you maybe buy more property. But Jesus says, "Go ahead, live your life like this, and see what the inevitable will bring." In Luke it is written: "And [Jesus] 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.'

This is a surprisingly complex thought, I think. What are "all kinds of greed?" Seems like there would be only one kind of greed, right? Money... And, even though it's a cliché to say it: our culture is very much of the mind that life does indeed actually consist in the abundance of possessions. That is how we measure everything. The big, bad "r-word" may be coming at us, a recession. What does that even mean, why is it so scary? It means that people are buying less possessions now than they did last quarter. Less buying means less selling means less jobs, less

money to go around. All of our livelihoods—whether we like it or not—depend, solely, on a society that has, and pursues, an abundance of possessions!

And the gloomy Psalm this morning, and the even gloomier Ecclesiastes, both agree with Jesus as well. They say this chasing after possessions, chasing after wind, is all there is! And it's a sad tragedy that we chase after it all, only to leave it behind when... **things change**.

Now, Jesus' parable does also speak of death, certainly, and this unexpected change comes for the rich man barring him from enjoying his abundance of possessions. But Jesus *also* speaks of life... which is why his saying is complex. He says, "*One's life* does not consist of possessions." What then, if Ecclesiastes and the Psalmist are right, *does* life consist of?

Now, I've sort of backed myself into a corner, here! I don't think *I* can tell you what life consists of, or come up with a neat anecdote or parable to sum it up. I do think that Scripture this morning is focusing our attention on **change**.

And when Jesus says, "all kinds of greed"—maybe, in addition to hoarding our goods for ourselves and our families and orienting all our lives toward gaining more—maybe Jesus also means the greediness for stability and safety and pleasure. If you want everything to only stay the same, all then *is* vanity, everything is like the blowing wind. But what if change, and risk, and service are more real, more close to God—closer to life—than stability and safety and pleasure?

This is what St. Paul is up to in his letter to the Colossians we've been hearing from. St. Paul says: remember, that Jesus, that Christ, has died. He opened himself, walking head long into change, and risk, and service. And St. Paul argues, in a beautiful way—that when we are baptized—when we're made wet in the font and filled with God's promises—we also died that death of Christ.

What if that change that we all worry and fret and grieve over is already passed? St. Paul says: What if, in Baptism, when your lives were hidden with Christ in God, what if then all the deaths, all the changes, have already gone by?

It *is* true, Paul argues. We have died. And, therefore, all the worry, the greed, and the frantic seeking after happiness and stability, what both he and Luke's Jesus call "greed"—those things *should* all fade. Paul writes: "These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator."

To get to this place, of placid, loving, uplifting, truth-telling—we don't need to die again and again. We only need to trust that we've already died, already been changed. We are fused to Christ, hidden in Christ. Christ is in us. And so, if Christ has undergone the ultimate change—then, we believe and trust, so have we.

When you look at the world from the lens of greed, of needing everything to stay the same forever, then everything *is* vanity. Everything is just grief. But what if you wade deeper into the water...? What if let yourself be drawn by the current, into your baptism, past the point of no return, into your new life in Christ?

As some of you might have known, I spent many years wandering outside the Church. I mean: truly, no one ever actually leaves the arms of Jesus, and the Spirit is always working on all people if you just listen, but: *I thought* I was outside. And, then, I was very enamored with Buddhism, especially the Japanese tradition of it, called Zen. As Buddhism traveled east from India, it passed through China. And there the tradition of meditating and seeking enlightenment was the same, but Buddhism absorbed some of the culture of China, especially Taoism. Taoism is hard to describe easily, but it's a philosophy that seeks, like Ecclesiastes, to discover a way of life that is at harmony with the world. All is indeed vanity when you are at odds with the "way" of the universe, the "way" things go, which is what the word "Tao" means... And so, Taoism plus Buddhism in China became Chan Buddhism, and it crossed the East China Sea and landed in Japan and became Zen.

Why am I telling you all this in a Christian church on Sunday morning? Because the Holy Spirit is reminding us that we live, already, a new life—that things change. A new life where we do not store up for ourselves treasures, but are rich toward God. A new life where we are on guard against all kinds of greed A new life that embraces change, risk and service. And there are some images from Zen that reflect this, I think. Reflect what Jesus has taught, and how Paul has articulated our lives in Christ in his letter to the Colossians.

What is the world, what is life? The teacher in Ecclesiastes says: it is temporary, and all our work here vanishes. The Psalmist says: it is temporary, but it's good that it's temporary, because evildoers will vanish, but God will hold us. To the question of what is the world, what is life—Jesus cleverly says: it is more than just possessions. And Paul says, flat out: Christ is all, and in all!

The Zen teacher Ehei (eh-hay) Dogen (who lived from 1200-1253) wrote this:

To what shall
I liken the world?
Moonlight, reflected
In dewdrops,
Shaken from a crane's bill.

Things change. But here in our new lives, we can confess that just because change is frightening, does *not* mean it isn't indescribably beautiful.

Amen.