

1) *Vanity of vanities—all human aspiration, all human activity, all human achievement—fruitless and futile—a chasing after wind, a quest to catch a cloud.*

Happy Sunday! We're in church on the ONE day every three years (or sometimes six) when we hear from the ancient anonymous author of the book of Ecclesiastes—

an amalgamation of Winnie the Pooh's doleful donkey Eeyore,

and Shakespeare's Macbeth: *All our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death.*

One does wonder if this every-once-in-a-while hearing of Ecclesiastes is one too many.

It's tempting to dismiss him with an eye roll, dispense him an anti-depressant, and dispatch him back into the funk from whence he came.

And yet . . . Jesus seems to channel Ecclesiastes in His own reaction to a plea for help in a dispute about inheritance.

*Make my brother give me my Fair Share, a younger brother asks.*

*Don't be greedy! Jesus replies. Sooner or later, you're gonna die,*

*and whatever you inherit—fair or not—you can't take it with you.*

*Don't fix your focus on GETTING rich; focus on BEING rich—rich "toward God".*

To which, I dare say, our first reaction might well be: *Say WHAT?!*

What to make of the poetry of Ecclesiastes, and the parable of Jesus?

2) For openers, let's note that neither the Teacher nor the Rich Man are is a slouch or a shyster.

Each has amassed an impressive set of acquisitions, none by nefarious means.

Neither has broken any laws, done any shady deals, mistreated any fellow citizens.

They haven't even demeaned anyone with disparaging tweets.

Both exercise abundant imagination, ingenuity, discipline, and energy.

They are successful in ways that could serve as role models for Bethesda's brightest children.

Be all that as it may, in the face of life's imminent end,

the Rich Man could WELL say what the Teacher DOES say: *IT'S NOT FAIR!*

*THE BENEFIT OF ALL MY WORK WILL GO TO THOSE WHO DIDN'T LIFT A FINGER FOR IT.*

And therein, perhaps, lies a clue as to what Jesus may be trying to convey

to the clearly frustrated (and quite possibly unjustly treated) brother

who tries to draft Jesus as his personal estate attorney—I, ME, MY, MINE.

3) There's an interesting synchronicity

in the Old Testament and Gospel lessons appointed for today.

In the speeches of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes and the Rich Man in the parable,

one form or another of the first-person singular pronoun "I" —

it appears no less than twelve times in each lesson.

The first-person PLURAL pronoun WE? — It shows up in the speech of NEITHER.

The second-person pronoun YOU (singular or plural)? — It shows up never once in EITHER.

(Well, the Rich Man does say YOU once—but he's addressing his own soul.)

The life of each is contained within a narcissistic, even solipsistic world.  
Resources that could, for each, be bridges of connections with other persons  
in the world beyond their ego boundaries—  
these potential bridges become well-built bulwarks behind which each sits in isolation.  
Yet however self-sufficient these two characters may have convinced themselves they are;  
they are rudely awakened to the fundamental fact  
that they don't have what it takes to be secure and self-sustaining in perpetuity—  
death happens.

4) Something in me, however, protests that Jesus has changed the subject.

His petitioner, the brother who wants his share of the family inheritance,  
he doesn't sound self-absorbed, doesn't sound "greedy".  
He just wants some help in getting that to which he believes he's entitled,  
and which he doubtless needs.

Isn't Jesus misconstruing and thus overreacting to the situation?

Perhaps. And yet, if you've ever had to adjudicate a THAT'S NOT FAIR fight  
between your children, your family members, your friends or colleagues—  
if you've observed a NOT FAIR! fight escalating back and forth in a Congressional hearing;  
then you know that, while not the same—while even seemingly opposed—  
CLAIMS OF JUSTICE and ASSERTIONS OF NARROW SELF-INTEREST are, in the heat of battle,  
devilishly difficult to distinguish and disentangle from each other.

When such "fairness" contests are over and done, everyone often ends up losers.

And whatever gains seem made in the moment, tend to evaporate over time.

*Be on guard*, Jesus tells the justice-seeking brother, *Be on guard against ALL KINDS of greed.*

This brother may not be bent on "having it all" like the parable's Rich Man.

But it's entirely possible, that, in pursuit of what may be rightfully his;  
he has allowed his passion for justice to become first ALL-absorbing,  
and then SELF-absorbing.

If so, he wouldn't be the first; nor will he be the last to cross the line,  
all the while utterly oblivious to the shift—

"What I rightly deserve" has become simply "What I really want—  
and what I will stop at nothing to get."

5) Jesus offers an alternative to all subtle forms of self-deceiving greed—  
being rich toward God—what might THAT mean?

NOT simply increasing our church pledge, getting involved in worthy causes,  
fighting for justice as best we can, befriending those who are ignored or discounted.  
Important investments, those—but it's not hard to imagine any or all being undertaken  
with the kind of self-absorbed fixation that sooner or later

would land us in the Slough of Despond right beside the Eeyore of Ecclesiastes—

*It's all for naught, at the end of the day, death flat-lines all our seeming gains.*

Being "rich toward God," I think, involves something more fundamental,  
a shift of orientation from that of our LIFE-GRASPING toward that of God's LIFE-GIVING.

When we turn our focus toward the God direction,  
what we see is God's own focus: unconditionally outward, other-beholding, radical love-giving.

- 6) The author of Colossians names all expressions of sin as, at root, expressions of greed;  
and expressions of greed as manifestations of idolatry—

that is, devotion to an image of God as what we see when we look in the mirror.

Greed, one way or another will be the death of us, the epistle writer says.

With THAT the Teacher of Ecclesiastes readily agrees:

*It is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with.*

But, says the author of Colossians, we are dead to that already.

*Anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language—*

none of these is any good at helping us hang on to life with our own two hands.

They are, indeed, counterproductive, life-destructive, and utterly unnecessary.

Because, insists the letter writer: *We have BEEN raised with Christ.*

*And OUR life is HIDDEN with Christ in God.*

The resurrection granted Him is the resurrection into which He has already incorporated us.

What we can't earned or store away for "keeps" is freely shared with us,

and sets us free to share ourselves with others.

That's a LIFE saver—an ETERNAL Life Saver.