

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.'

My wife Carol tells me that when Tanzanian Christians say good-bye to one another, their words often express their faith that, in the end, they rest in the hands of God and all their plans are subject to his Providence. And so, they regularly add the phrase, "...if God wishes." "I will see you tomorrow, if God wishes." "I will harvest the crops next week if God wishes." "I will go to town tomorrow if God wishes." They have more experience with death than many of us. "Brother Abraham, where is he?" "Oh, he had a heart attack last night and has gone to heaven." "He died because of malaria." "He was injured in a work accident and they could not save him." It is a world in which medical technology is scarce, where people might not know about their own individual blood pressure, or HDL/LDL ratios, or about shadows on their lungs or tumors in their chests. Death suddenly appears and off goes the person. So, the Tanzanian Christian acknowledges the uncertainty of life and expresses faith in God by adding that little conditional clause, "... if God wishes."

The rich man in this morning's parable adds no such qualification. He does not say, "I will build new barns *if* God wishes." "I will eat, drink, and be merry *if* God wishes." No, he simply forges ahead as if these things are in his control. He seems fortified in his self-confidence by his money. He has had a good year. Sometimes that happens. Sometimes farmers have good years. But farming can be a strange business. Carol and I visited my

sister's farm down in Maryland recently and found that the rain patterns throughout the summer have been such that that farm has missed the summer rains. The town of Harrington nearby has had plenty of rain and the crops look great, but the town of Denton is parched. The lawns are brown and the crops shriveled. I fear that it will not be a good harvest for the Brown family down there in Maryland.

But the farmer in this parable has had a good year, made a big profit, and now he supposes that his money can shield him for life's uncertainties.

And he is right to some degree. His money and his barns *should* help stabilize life for him and shelter him from the bad times. And yet, there stands God, knocking at the door. And for all his money and all his barns, he still rests in the hands of God, to whom he must render an account someday. "This night your soul is *required* of you." Notice the authority of the sentence. Your soul is "required" of you. Like a loan, it is now due to its rightful owner.

Human life is complex, vulnerable, fragile, ephemeral, and not easily mastered by our wisdom, our plans, nor our commonsense.

I do not want to be too hard on the rich man in this morning's parable, because we ourselves are tempted in his direction. After all, many a man has lived life long stretches of life preoccupied with many things, but unmindful of his Maker, and many a woman, unmindful of her Maker. Far too often we fail

to add that Tanzanian conditional, “if God wishes.” But in the process, we render life poorer for ourselves and for our neighbors.

If we are prone to forget about God, perhaps it is because we are too confident that we have life figured out. So it is with the rich man in the parable. He has made a profit and he has a reasonable plan for his profit: he will pull down his old barns, build bigger ones, and anticipate even larger profits. He can then foresee the day when he can rest, “eat, drink, and be merry.”

The problem is the Curveball. The problem is that even the most sensible plans are still subject to God’s Providence.

This is the great theme of the book from which our First Lesson comes — the book of *Ecclesiastes*. This book reminds us that human wisdom only takes us so far. In the end, we must still deal with God.

Ancient Israel cherished the traditions of wisdom, same as her neighbors. For the ancients, “wisdom” concerned the application of reason to conduct. It could be called “practical reason.” Wisdom was about intelligent ways to live in this world. It concerned those proverbs and peasant sayings I love to quote to my boys (and about which they tend to roll their eyes, I am so old-fashioned):

- + A penny saved is a penny earned.
- + Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.
- + A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.
- + A stitch in time saves nine.
- + Plan your work, work your plan.

But the interesting thing about *Ecclesiastes* is that Solomon himself — the greatest of Israel’s wise teachers — critiques Israel’s wisdom tradition. He warns the people that wisdom is not enough — that life is too vulnerable and ephemeral to be entirely controlled by practical reason.

And so, the Preacher in *Ecclesiastes* proclaims again and again that all is vanity. That word “vanity” in the Hebrew is “*hevel*” which literally means “mist, vapor, breath.” All that this human life amounts to, he says, is *hevel*.

Consider the following passage from the Ninth Chapter of *Ecclesiastes*. It is the kind of caution the Rich Man in today’s parable should have heeded:

¹¹Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. ¹²For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them. (Ecclesiastes 9:11-12, NRS)

How often do you hear people say, “Life just hasn’t turned out the way I had planned or expected!” There are times when you have no choice but to let go of your plans. Perhaps you find out that the career you thought you wanted isn’t at all what you expected it to be. Or, what you were trained to do isn’t needed anymore. More and more people change careers once or several times.

There are times when you find yourself having to give up on long-held hopes and dream. Perhaps that one you love suddenly abandons you – due to illness, accident, unfaithfulness, addiction, your own fault, or whatever it may be. Maybe your beautiful retirement house is ruined by fire or flood. Maybe you suddenly find yourself homeless due to circumstances over which you have little or no control. Maybe you have a stroke and find yourself suddenly imprisoned in a body that is paralyzed. Maybe you find out you have MS or Alzheimer’s or some other

terrible debilitating disease that imposes a different life upon you than the one you had planned. Maybe a bridge collapses under you, a steam pipe explodes, some troubled person starts shooting randomly, or a bomb goes off.¹

Human life is *hevel*, Ecclesiastes teaches.

And so, the problem for the rich farmer was not that he was a farmer, nor that he was rich, but that he put too much stock in his money and his own commonsense. What ailed him is that he forgot about *hevel*. Sadder still, he forgot about the God who is stronger than *hevel* and who loves him.

His problem, then, is that he had permitted his money to make him poor. He says nothing about the hungry man lying at his gate, he says nothing about charity, he lays up no treasure in heaven, he seems selfish in the eyes of his neighbors, he seems like deserving prey to thieves and robbers, he cannot grieve for his loved ones who have died because he acknowledges no God who can give them life, he cannot sing “In the sweet by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore...” All he does is to rejoice in his plan to “eat, drink, and be merry,” little understanding that that is a pitiful plan, for tonight his soul is required of him.

In the book of Revelation we read about the patience and gentlemanly stance of Jesus:

²⁰Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.(Rev. 3:20, KJV)

Thus Jesus waits — waits upon you and upon me.

But in the end, Jesus does not go away. He *cannot* go away, for his love for us prevents him. One day, there is an end to his waiting. One day, every knee on earth and in heaven and under the earth will bend before Jesus and acknowledge that he is the Lord. One day, barns will not shield us from Jesus, nor will all the gold of Midas. He is the one with whom we have to do. And time’s a wastin’. Life is uncertain, but God is not, and therefore it is better to remember God in the days of our youth, remember him in the days of our strength, remember him in old age.

From our Maker’s hand, we were meant not simply for eating, drinking, and making merry, but also for love. We were meant for service on earth and riches in heaven. We were meant for Jesus. Real and exciting life is with him — the one who came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. That is, we are meant for the true Guardian and Shepherd of our souls, even Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

¹ This fine paragraph and the one before it come from my wife, Pastor Carol Fryer, from her sermon this day to be preached at nearby Saint Peter’s Church, New York, NY.