

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 8th Sunday after Pentecost, August 4, 2019.

Our thoughts this morning are with the people of El Paso: those who have died and their families, those who have been injured and their families, first responders and all those in authority at whatever level. Those who have rallied the community, all those who participate in healing, and all those who in the days ahead will try to understand more fully how and why this tragedy occurred and how best to respond to it.

It's too early to process all that has happened. But, as with all such incidents, people of faith – that would be you and I - have a responsibility to hold out hope and share that hope. The option is to give into our worst fears. We have a choice, which is our constant challenge. And, as often the case, choice, the exercise of our free will, is the subject of today's lessons.

At first reading, this morning's lessons are pretty depressing.

- We have Ecclesiastes (**Ecclesiastes 1:1,12-14; 2:18-23**) whose conclusion is that “all is vanity.”
- The psalm (**Psalms 49:1-11**) concludes that “even though honored, the wise cannot live for ever; they are like the beasts that perish.”
- St. Paul (**Colossians 3:1-11**) reminds us that we are right on the edge: “But now – no more waiting - you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.”
- And, in the gospel (**Luke 12:13-21**), what does Jesus call the one who appears to place hope in possessions? “You fool!”

Well, if these sentiments represent the last word, we're in trouble, aren't we? But do they represent the last word? Guess what. Our answer is “no,” and we see our reprieve in the very lessons that have the potential to depress us.

Ecclesiastes gives us a list of vanities. We are vain when we think we are better than perhaps we are. We can identify with the list. We've done some really good

things, only to have little or nothing to show for it. We know this feeling. Work hard, be responsible, love God and love neighbor. We've done it, but we don't have – or think we don't have – much of a return. Was it all in vain?

The author, in a kind of backwards way, says no, it was not all in vain. In fact, worrying about a payoff is the ultimate vanity. It's a sign that we don't believe that God can change the outcome. "For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest." We've been there, and might be there this morning.

But we don't have to stay there. But, is this possibility itself vanity? That's the big question. For people of faith, the answer is no, we don't have to stay there, because God can rescue and chooses to do so. In other words, we are no longer there. God has changed the equation. God has promised a new life, a new reality, a new outcome. And it's an outcome that we can begin to experience in this life. Not there, but here.

Now, is that vanity? I don't think so. I'll take my chances with the love of God here, thank you very much.

Here are verses 6 and 7 from this morning's Psalm: "We can never ransom ourselves, or deliver to God the price of our life; for the ransom of our life is so great, that we should never have enough to pay for it."

This is exactly where you and I are. We want to buy our way out, but we don't have the cash, we don't have a credit card, we don't have an app, we don't have platform. We need intervention. On our own, the future is bleak, just as Psalm 49 describes. But go to the very next Psalm, Psalm 50, and we hear this: "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me."

Well, maybe all is not lost. Maybe God can intervene and will intervene. And maybe God has already intervened. That's what you and I believe. That's why we gather in this place. We believe in the decision of God not to let us slip away through our own selfishness. Vanity? Maybe. But, you know what, given that rescue is God's choice, not ours, I'll take my chances, thank you very much.

St. Paul had this same confidence. He knew very well what we are up against. He details in this passage from Colossians many of the temptations that you and I face, and submit to from time to time. And he warns us: “On account of these, the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.” As far as Paul is concerned, the choice is clear: “But now you must get rid of all such things ... and clothe yourselves with the new self” that Jesus has provided in his birth, life, death and, above all, his resurrection.”

We don't, we can't, solve our dilemma by ourselves. But God can and God does. That's our hope. That's our promise ... if we seek the “new self.” We have to want it. We have to trust that God means it. We have to believe that this is not wishful thinking, but God in action. Yes, sometimes it's tough to see this, but being tough in the midst of suffering is our calling.

Again, is this simply more vanity? Well, we hope not. And, when we accept God's love, we know not. What's the antidote to vanity? Truth, with a capital T. And, in Christ, you and I are confident that we have found the Truth. Or better, the Truth has found us, to which we say, “Thank you very much.”

The passage from Luke's gospel poses the options this way: “Store up your treasures for yourself, or share God's treasures with others.” Jesus responds to the man in the crowd: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Think twice about that additional barn, and think twice about all that you have in the existing barns.

One of the great qualities of our nation is charity. Yes, many services are provided through taxation, but other services, the things that often make the difference between subsistence and joy, are provided through thankful and generous hearts. You all are wonderful examples of this spirit of sharing.

Is generosity a form of vanity? It can be, but it doesn't have to be. When we share, which of the following questions do we ask ourselves first: “Will this make me feel good?” or “Is this the right thing to do?” If we choose the second option – is it the right thing to do - the first question – will we feel good – takes care of itself. We will feel good. Vanity might well be a result. But it shouldn't be the driver of the transaction.

Well, we have wrestled with the issue of vanity. It's tricky, isn't it, particularly as we grapple with more tragedy? But, you know what, think about what life would be like without the vanity of seeing ourselves as children of God. Not mere objects of cosmic forces, with no sense of where we came from or where we're going or even if we matter at all. But prize creatures of the Creator of the Universe, who gives us freedom, and incredible leeway in how we use that freedom, and forgiveness when we misuse that freedom, and the promise and the deliverance of new life in Jesus Christ.

These are all gifts from God. Wouldn't the highest form of vanity be to ignore the Source of these gifts? Maybe the vanity that we wrestle with is a good thing because it reminds us of God's love, without which our self-love would be pitiful.

A vanity, as a piece of furniture, usually has a mirror where we see things more clearly. Our reaction is either "not bad" or "yikes." The Church has such a piece of furniture. It's called an altar. And it's where we see God more clearly, in and through our Lord Jesus Christ. Our response, when we look into that mirror, especially in the midst of tragedy, should be "God is love, and we are the recipients of that love, and we have a responsibility to proclaim that love in word and deed.. Vanity? I don't think so. Assignment? Yes, absolutely. And for this assignment, we say to the Lord, "Thank you very much."

Amen.