

## Ordinary Times

The church calendar has several ways of designating the seasons and days of our year as a worshipping community. One of the ways is to mark the special events: Advent, Christmas, Lent & Easter and Pentecost where the Sundays within each is numbered. Another is to list the Sundays numbered using the term Proper in a numerical order. Today is Proper 13...this number associates certain Psalms and texts to certain dates and remains constant for those dates despite the variation caused by the placement of Lent in relationship to the Jewish festival of Passover. This latter issue causes the two systems to assign different numbers to the Sundays. That first method is the one we usually use...the naming of the Sunday by its relationship to one of our important seasons. So this year Proper 13 coincides with the 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. Another year Proper 13 was the 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost because Passover occurred earlier that year. Another way of keeping track of the Sundays refers to this time of the year as the Ordinal time...the numbered time between Christmas and Easter; the two main events for church life. We often call this period in church life the Ordinary time. During this time our liturgical colors are green. During this ordinary time there are no festivals or celebrations to mark the time...it's just ordinary. And this seems to be why the lectionary takes us into the book of Ecclesiastes for the writer of this text describes the events and happenings of our ordinary times and life well. This writer called the Teacher seems to be a man who has seen it all, done it all, tried it all according to his writings as he sought to find the meaning of life. Reading through the text as a whole it would become easy to be depressed, if one accepted that his writings are all there is to life. Because according to him, life is monotonous, tedious and futile...or at least that what it seems like at first glance. The first section and much of what he says reads as a litany life is a dreary experience. That nothing he has found to pursue, except perhaps wisdom, is worth the pursuit. It is like chasing the wind he says. He concludes in verses 12-14 of our text that God has left humans with a hard task: the task to find joy or satisfaction in life. And when considering much of the ordinary aspects of our lives...the day to day sameness which often prevails...it is easy to agree that life is often dreary. This idea is at the core of our ordinary times...the task God has given us is just living our life and sometimes life is just hard. Things happen over which we have no control...sickness...losses of friends and family which have ended significant relationships through estrangement or death...changes in financial situation...a host of things which impact our lives and leave us wondering about the meaning of our lives. In the midst of a life that seems rife with monotony and dissatisfaction and sorrow, it seems that only a few times a year we can see small glimmers of God's grace around our celebrations of Christmas and Easter. Those moments of dazzling brightness break through the darkness only twice a year. Our selected verses give an impression of this sense of futility found in Ecclesiastes which is summed up in a verse outside our reading: 2:9 which states: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun." As I said, if you want a discouraging word, Ecclesiastes will definitely provide it. But within this passage there is a link to the thoughts of the rich fool found in our passage from Luke's gospel. In the ponderings of the writer of Ecclesiastes he worries about the futility of what he has gained for it "must be left to those who come after me." For the farmer in the parable Jesus taught is confronted by this same reality by God after all his scheming to build bigger barns for storage to ensure his future so he can

“relax, eat, drink and be merry” for many years. It is not until the third chapter that we find Ecclesiastes putting forth a more positive set of thoughts with the words about there being a time for everything and a season for all things. Ecclesiastes comes to much the same thought about life as the farmer in Luke did but from a different perspective about the toil. Ecclesiastes 3: 13-14 states “moreover it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. Whatever God does endures forever, nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him.” The hard task of living life is God’s gift to us. The hardness of it comes in finding the joy which God intends for us to have in living. There are several things to which we should pay attention in the parable that Jesus told. In many ways, if this were a story about a modern businessman, it might be viewed differently. The man might not be considered a fool but a wise and responsible person...he has a thriving business. His land has produced so abundantly that he lacks storage space in his barns. His plan is to pull down those and build bigger ones so all his grain and good may be stored. This will provide him ample savings to set aside for the future and he will be able to enjoy a good retirement. Put this way, isn’t that what our culture encourages us to do? This man seems to have it all figured out...but in the parable this isn’t what happens because the rich man has not counted on or considered his reckoning with God. This parable is often presented as being about money and the hoarding of it; but as usual with Jesus’ teachings there are layers. In the conversation Jesus recounts the man having with his soul...it is all in the first person only referring to himself through it all...me, myself and I are the only notes struck. The land has produced abundantly, but he gives no thought to gratitude to God for that blessing or for the workers whose labor has made the planting and harvesting possible. Like the rich farmer, we are tempted to think that having large amounts of money and possessions stored up will make us secure. Sooner or later, however, we learn that no amount of wealth or property can secure our lives. And our reality is that no matter how much we have, we are always aware of those things we don’t have. We are bombarded by marketing wizards whose job it is to convince us of all the product we need to complete our lives. And so we never feel we have enough. More importantly, no amount of money can secure our lives or give us true satisfaction. In fact, we find that Jesus repeatedly warns that wealth can get in the way of our relationship with God. “Take care!” he says. “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” It isn’t that God doesn’t want us to be wise about providing for retirement or future needs. It is all about our priorities. It is about who is truly God in our lives. It is about how we invest our lives and the gifts God has given us. It is about how we fundamentally align our lives; how we view the world and others; through what lens are we looking—the one focused on ourselves and our passing wants and desires, or a lens looking toward God and our neighbor, toward God’s mission to bless and redeem the whole world. Do we understand we are steward of gifts which are blessings from God? The tragic tale of the rich fool isn’t a reminder that we might die sooner than we hoped. The parable digs deeper toward the heart. The way the parable is explicitly framed in verse 15 makes it a warning against greed, acquisitiveness and egotistical preoccupation with one’s own security. It is about the folly of living in one’s own self-absorbed universe and constructing a life in which they don’t have to care about anyone else, especially those they can’t see—or don’t want to see. This parable explores the reality that greed is idolatry. Greed compels us to banish anyone who looks like they might threaten “what’s ours”. Greed constructs worldview

In which self-interest is the cardinal virtue. The idolatry of greed lies, whispering that cupidity won't erode my capacity for community. Idolatry can make fools of us all when it convinces us to create systems which justify our arrogance and hardheartedness toward those Luke terms the least, the lost and the last. It is important to remember what the farmer's error is in this parable. He is not portrayed as wicked—that is, he has not gained his wealth illegally or by taking advantage of others. But his total focus is self. There is no thought to using the abundance he has been given to help others, no expression of gratitude for good fortune, no recognition of God at all...he is worshipping at the trinity of me, myself and I. And we often tend to go there thinking we don't have enough...enough money, enough time, enough stuff. Our culture tells us this is true, and we often buy this thought. But there is another thought about money found in an old Beatles' tune: Money Can't Buy Me Love. Culture promises that if we just get a little more we will be satisfied, but that is never the reality. Greed cause more to never be enough. Back to the Ecclesiastes text and the task God has given us to find joy in the ordinary around us; the things we do and the relationships we can have. God's gift of life to us is that we were made in God's own image...God's own image is of a being who is love...whose focus is always about reaching out to others and being in relationships. Our task which God has given us is to find that out...that we are made to love and be loved, to care for others as God cares for us...that when we turn our thoughts and lives to those things that bring us together in community...with our focus being on the welfare of all within the community we are then storing up treasures which make us "rich toward God." In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.