

Yr. C, Proper 13
July 31, 2022
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1618 Words

Lessons: Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23
Psalm 49:1-11
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

Once, when I was a sophomore in college, some friends and I decided we would sign up to run in Spartanburg's upcoming 10 kilometer race. None of us had ever run in a race before. None of us had ever run *very far* before. We *had run* the 'Krispy Kreme 500' numerous times. (The 'Hot Doughnuts Now' sign was about 500 yards from the Sigma Nu house.) The fact that we had run so often to Krispy Kreme is the *main reason* we were not fit to run a 10 kilometer race. "Vanity of vanities," says the Teacher. "All is vanity."

I think most of you know enough Biblical Greek to see the heart of the problem. We were sophomores—Sopho (wise), Moron (fool). We were wise fools alright, trying to map out a 3-week training plan to get ready. There's no way to properly train for a 10K in 20 days when you start from 0. "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity...a chasing after (the) wind."

Life can be this way sometimes. We set our minds on things that are not of ultimate importance, and whip up all kinds of energy around them. St. Paul names a few of these things in his letter to the Colossians: "Passions, impurities, and greed..."

Like a Terrier gnawing on a bone, we can easily be tempted to fixate on things *below us*: "wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language." Cable TV commentary is brimful of sophomores, gnawing on these bones. Twitter and Facebook are overflowing with wise fools, chasing after the wind. "Vanity of vanities."

During my first week of training I made a great discovery, but I did not tell my sophomore friends. Lo and behold, there was going to be a 5K race that weekend...in Denmark. (Not the country, the small town in the low country, near my home, where the land is flat.) I decided to practice ½ the distance of the Spartanburg race on a flatter, easier route.

Plus, I would collect another souvenir! We were all so eager to get our little rectangular signs to pin on our shirts. You know, the 'official number' which makes you *look like* a bona fide runner! "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity and a chasing after (the) wind."

So, what are the advantages that you don't talk about—the little privileges or head starts that give you a leg up?

We would like everybody to think that we are self-made men and women...that we've pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps with nothing but our own smarts and our own hard work. "This *also* is vanity and a great evil." Everything we are and everything we have is a loving gift from God. PERIOD.

Here are just a few tiny examples: It was the love of your underpaid kindergarten teacher which set you up for the love of your underpaid first grade teacher and so on. Remember all the teachers and coaches who have helped *you* get off on the right foot again and again.

What about the love of grandparents or parents, aunts and uncles, spouses or children who have picked you up when you've fallen down...or maybe gave you a nice boost at just the right moment.

Perhaps it was the love of a colleague at work—a client or a boss or someone you supervised who showed patience or kindness or *mercy* when you really needed it.

I hope you've experienced the gifts of God through the Church—a community of love and compassion, made up of *actual* living members of the Body of Christ, “fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament...for building (one another) up in love...” as St. Paul beautifully described to the Ephesians. (4.16)

So, I went to the Denmark Dogwood Festival all by myself that Saturday. I did not want anybody to see me if I failed to finish the race. I got my official number and pinned it on my shirt. Some guy fired a cap gun and a big bunch of us set off running. I had no clue what kind of pace to set. I just decided I needed to look like I knew what I was doing...find a spot somewhere in the middle—not too fast, not too slow.

I mean, *why did I care?* It seems so ridiculous now. That's how vanity is. It seems ridiculous in hindsight, if we end up becoming wiser and learning from mistakes.

And this is precisely what St. Paul is teaching the Colossians *and us*. “Set your minds on things *above!*” he writes. In other words, we've got to *look up* if we want to *live up* to becoming the people God created us to be.

We get to aspire *toward* the life of Christ. By him and with him and in him, we get to “clothe ourselves with a *new self*, and become renewed in the image of our Creator.” This is good news, y'all: It actually feels like freedom when we set our minds on seeking godly things that are above!

Since I had been training for *less than a week*, I started feeling a real strain in my legs about halfway through the Denmark race. But then, *miraculously*, at the 2nd mile marker, my discomfort eased up. It was like being on auto-pilot. “Hmmm,” I thought. “Maybe I *will* make it the whole distance...In fact,” I thought to myself, “I think I can run even faster!” So, I rounded the final corner onto Main Street, and there was a long straightaway to the finish line...about 500 yards away.

Unfortunately, there was another runner 50 yards ahead, but moving slower than I was. I could easily see what was going to happen. At my current pace and her current pace I was going to close the gap *somewhat*, and cross the finish line *not very far behind her*.

All I could think was, “*This* is my Krispy Kreme 500!” When I looked up at the banner over the finish line in the distance, it no longer said, ‘Dogwood Festival.’ *To me*, it read: ‘Hot Doughnuts Now!’ And I kicked into gear and took off.

You can guess what happened next. The other runner sped up too. I was not gaining as much ground as I needed to gain. The predicament I had foreseen at 500 yards out—you know, finishing 10 or 15 yards behind the other runner...I had just made it *worse* by sprinting.

Now, I was likely to finish just a few feet...or even inches behind her, and looking as if I had tried way too hard in the process. I convinced myself that I *just had* to cross that finish line before her, and so I poured it all the way on.

How did I become so consumed by a meaningless contest...with a stranger? What meaningless contests with strangers have been consuming you? What meaningless contests *with yourself* have distracted you from seeking the things that are above? “Vanity of vanities. All is vanity and a chasing after (the) wind.”

Jesus zeroes in on this problem in today's Gospel lesson. You see, a man who is feeling a little...*competitive* with his brother tries to use Jesus for a little one-upmanship. He wants to get a ‘leg up.’ He wants to get a free boost. “*Hey Teacher*, tell my brother to divide up the family inheritance with me.”

Telling Jesus to help us acquire more money is the fastest way to get an earful instead! Jesus *loves* to preach about money, and he does it all the time! I think it's because greed is one of the main forms of selfishness. Greed *may just be* the quintessential vanity of *vanities*. It distracts us from caring about God *and* caring about our neighbors.

In the throes of my own vanity I crossed the finish line...*inches in front of* that other runner. And it was not elegant at all! I was wheezing, trying to catch my breath, doubled over on the sidewalk. Meanwhile, she was smiling, sipping water, and chatting with friends. *Everyone*—including me—could see who the real loser was. My vanity had gotten the best of me.

...just like the man who told Jesus to tell his brother to give him the family money. Jesus could see that this man's greed was getting the best of him. And so he told a story to help him see his own vanity...his own foolishness.

In Jesus' parable, the rich man—on the night he was dying—looked just like the fool he had become, by choosing to go to extraordinary lengths to hoard his grain in enormous barns, instead of simply sharing more of it with his poor and hungry neighbors.

The moral of Jesus' story is this: "Don't be foolish. *Be rich...*toward God." The moral of St. Paul's teaching is, "Don't be foolish. Set your mind on things *above*." The moral of Ecclesiastes is, "Don't be foolish. Seek the goodness of God."

And I believe the key to all of these lessons is found in the refrain of our Psalm. "We can never ransom ourselves. We can never deliver to God the price of our life." So, therefore, live your precious life as a gift, and share it—always and everywhere—as a thanks-giving to God.

My running career came to a swift conclusion after a more reasonable performance in the Spartanburg 10K. I learned a valuable life lesson about the destructive power of vanity. Whenever I'm tempted to chase after the wind, I'm able to laugh at myself and remember that life is not a race to be won, but a gift to be opened and shared...a mystery to be celebrated with love and gratitude.

Amen.