

## **“Vainities and Vapors”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
July 31, 2022 – Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Luke 12:13-21

Jesus’ parable in today’s gospel lesson of the rich man who had to build bigger barns to store all his crops and other accumulations always reminds me of my college years living in Kansas, a place rich with big barns and silos for crop storage. Soaring high above all Kansan towns, you will not find congregational church steeples as you do throughout New England, but grain elevators, which are several-stories-tall clusters of silos, where grain from nearby farms are gathered and stored until transferred to trailers and rail cars to be moved elsewhere by truck or train. All of these grain elevators large; some of them are absolutely colossal. One of my favorite pastimes during my college years was riding my motorcycle out to and around the largest grain elevators, including the two largest in the world in the nearby cities of Hutchinson and Wichita, each of which are half a mile in length and together hold enough wheat to make flour for all the bread baked in the USA over the course of three months. Those are some impressively big barns!

In Jesus’ parable, he is not condemning big barns or other places for storing grain, which were as important to those living in Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth, located in a region that produced an abundance of wheat, figs, olives, and pomegranates, as they are for those living today in the middle of that beautiful breadbasket called Kansas. He is using the story to point out the foolishness of gathering more and more physical possessions, hoarding them so as to live a life of comfort and ease, with no concern for gathering spiritual wealth or being “rich toward God,” that is using one’s wealth for God’s work, especially caring for those without enough bread or other possessions.

To Jesus, gathering stuff for the sake of gathering stuff or in order to have a life unburdened by the needs of others is foolish, for you can’t take your accumulated grain, yachts, spaceships, or any other possessions to the grave with you, and you never know when the time will come for you to go to that place where possessions don’t matter. But you can use whatever possessions you do have, even if you’re not wealthy enough to own a yacht or spaceship, for God’s ongoing

work, which outlives us and continues well after we're no longer living on the face of the earth.

Using whatever wealth you do have -- whether in the form of time, talent, or treasure -- to give to others, especially those most in need, offers a blessing that transcends time as blessing others inspires blessings *from* others that continues an upward cycle of life- and world-changing love. That's what truly matters in this life in which so much of our striving just doesn't seem to have any meaning.

Long before Jesus gave us his lesson on living in a way that truly matters, another teacher, provided a similar lesson in his book called the Teacher, or Ecclesiastes in the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. The book is named after its author, "the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (Ecclesiastes 1:1). This teacher, or *Qoheleth* in Hebrew, is traditionally identified as Solomon, son of David and Bathsheba and king of the empire of Israel at its zenith. *Qoheleth*, translated as teacher, literally means gatherer, and Solomon was renowned for gathering things, including wisdom.

Wise old Solomon, more likely later writers offering their collected wisdom in his name, tells us throughout his book that all is vanity, or *hevel* in Hebrew, literally translated as vapor, mist, or breath. Indeed, our lives and everything in them are vaporous, unboxable, ever-changing, here today and gone tomorrow. Even that which we spend a lifetime gathering is vaporous.

Solomon, the gatherer of wisdom, also gathered land as he expanded the empire of Israel greatly beyond the borders of his father David's realm. Over the course of his 40-year reign as king, he gathered vast amounts of gold as people of neighboring lands paid him tribute annually to keep him from conquering and taking their land also. According to 1 Kings, in a single year, he collected in tribute a whopping 40,000 pounds of gold! In addition to these treasures, he gathered and collected horses and chariots from lands near and far. And most notoriously, also from lands near and far, he gathered 700 wives and 300 concubines, including the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh, and he gathered their deities, constructing not only the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem, but temples and worship centers throughout Israel for the foreign gods Ashtoreth, Milcom, Chemosh, and Molech (1 Kings 11:5-9).

Old Solomon the gatherer did not just gather wisdom, but lots of stuff, including lots of commandment-busting stuff (remember Commandments number one: Have no other gods before me, number two: Make no idols). Solomon the wise teacher was a person full of contradictions, and we can learn from his folly as well as from his wisdom. For the one who taught us that all was vaporous showed us foolishness and failure by trying to fill his life with that which is vaporous. Indeed, today there's not even a trace of his stuff left except for the writings attributed to him.

These are good lessons for us to remember today as we have too many examples of people and nations trying to fill their hearts by taking and hoarding the stuff of others including their very lives. But the human heart will never be fulfilled by the taking of the lives or stuff of others, nor will it be satisfied by a life of oblivious, care-free living.

What will fulfill us is not taking but giving what we do have in love. We can be fulfilled by building bigger barns only if they enable us to give bigger gifts, or as Anglican priest John Wesley, founder of Methodism, often preached: "Earn all you can to save all you can to give all you can." In a world that teaches us to chase after so much that is vaporous and vain, may we seek instead to do what matters and what truly lasts: Let us always do the work of gathering to do the greater work of giving in love. Amen.