

August 4, 2013 – Proper 13C

If you ever look at old paintings – like, Medieval up through Victorian, and even some Puritan portraits – you’ll see a lot of skulls. Many portraits of famous men would show them at a desk or table of some sort, with a skull sitting there. The skull is called a “memento mori,” which is Latin for “remember that you will die.” It is an artistic, symbolic reminder that death is inevitable. I learned about this when I was an English major, because it can also be a theme in music, architecture, and poetry as well as other written forms. Sometimes the memento mori was a little more subtle, such as a flower with the petals falling off.

There’s one painting from around 1671 by Philippe de Champaigne that portrays life, death, and time: it’s a still life with a flower in a vase – Life; a skull – Death; and an hourglass – Time. If you are interested in this stuff you can look online and see that picture and others on Wikipedia under “memento mori.” That picture is called *Vanitas*, which might ring a bell. Our first reading, from Ecclesiastes, began how? Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. Now, here vanity doesn’t mean excessively proud of your looks, or even your

achievements, although that gets a little closer. I’ve read that “vanity” means “words,” or “vapors,” but basically it means that most of what we **do** in our lives is done in vain – that it’s ultimately futile or worthless. Depressing, huh?

Well, yes and no. The whole point the writer of Ecclesiastes, referred to as Quohelah or “the Preacher,” is warning us about placing too much meaning on our possessions and plans, our property and professions – these things seem to mean a lot to us, but which, for the most part, have very little eternal value. A little later in Ecclesiastes, which is admittedly a very short and strange book, the Teacher says,:

God has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. . . . it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. . . . (3:11-15)

So clearly the Preacher isn’t saying that wealth and possessions are bad; in fact, they can keep us occupied. But don’t labor under the illusion that our lives are more meaningful because we have more

wealth and possessions; and the same, to a lesser degree, goes for wisdom. We should focus on how God has given us everything, our Preacher seems to be saying, and thus stand in awe of God.

All of Ecclesiastes is, really, one long memento mori – a reflection on the brevity of life. The Preacher closes by saying: The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every secret thing, whether good or evil. (12:13-14)

Our reading from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians takes up the same theme, in a slightly different vein: set your mind on the things that are above. But rather than saying, "remember that you **will** die," he says, "You have **already** died to your old self, through your baptism, and now you need to continue to put to death the old self with its practices and allow God to renew every part of you.

So when we get to our Gospel, we are prepared for Jesus' message.

This passage requires a little background, or it doesn't make all that much sense. Jesus has been teaching. In my Bible there are four pages of almost all red letters, which of course are the words of

Jesus, so he has been teaching a lot, in various places. Right now, he has come from a meal with Pharisees and lawyers, and a crowd has gathered, so Jesus is teaching about weighty things, telling the crowd that everything will eventually be uncovered; there are no secrets from God; the hairs of our heads are all counted; the Holy Spirit will guide us if we must make a defense of our faith before the authorities. Great, eternal topics. And then a guy in the crowd pipes up:

"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

That's where our reading starts, and it sounds like a reasonable question, really, since in the Old Testament the great teachers, especially Moses, were also the mediators and judges in disputes. But here, Jesus has been teaching, and this guy comes up with this out of nowhere.

When I was in Baltimore, one of the three or four priests would always take the kids out for a children's sermon; one day, I had told the children a story, and then I asked them a question. Maybe something simple like, "How do you think Jesus wants you to act

towards your mother and father?” Little Stephen Windisch had only recently started coming to the children’s sermon, and he was very excited and started waving his hand, so I called on him thinking he had an idea about something nice he could do for his mommy or his daddy, and he said: “I got a Diego lunchbox!” [Dora and Diego is a popular cartoon for young kids.]

Well, the guy in the crowd is sort of like Stephen. Jesus has just said, “When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.”

And our friend here, who’s definitely not an excitable three-year old, pipes up and says, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

The Interrupter here clearly hasn’t been listening. He is completely preoccupied with his situation, and he is not the first nor the last person to become consumed by issues of wills and inheritances. But his situation is so prominent in his mind that here he is, hearing the greatest teacher of all, and he’s like a little kid in

the classroom with a nonsequeter that proves where his mind is, and it’s definitely not with the teaching!

So Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool

Even though it wouldn’t be inappropriate for a teacher to address the man’s issues, there are a few problems here. Besides the fact that his question reveals that the man hasn’t been listening, there’s also the issue of Jesus’ purpose in his brief life here. He wasn’t here to mediate disputes; he came to remind us where we come from, where we’re going, and what’s important in the meantime.

Now, in this parable, note that Jesus doesn’t condemn or even mildly criticize the man’s success **or** his riches. Those things aren’t the problem. The problem is that this man seems to think he’ll live forever and that his grain and his goods will provide all the security and happiness he needs. Thus, God tells the man that this is his last night on earth, and Jesus tells his listeners, “Memento Mori: remember that you will die.” Earlier in Luke, Jesus had said, “What does it profit if you gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit yourself?” Here, he says, “The real treasure here is God –

connection with God, a heart turned to God, a being entirely filled with God's love for all God's creatures."

This man's worth is in goods that he won't enjoy. He hasn't cultivated a life of prayer and gratitude and generosity. He has stored everything in barns when he clearly could have used some of it to help the desperately poor. He has put all his eggs in one basket, so to speak, but the basket stays and he goes. He has forgotten that mortal life is fleeting. Like the man overly concerned with his portion of the family inheritance, he needs a shift in his thinking and priorities. And the irony is that a true shift in priorities along the lines Jesus is suggesting will give much more satisfaction, comfort, peace, and sense of accomplishment than accumulating possessions could ever do.

I worry that it's perhaps more difficult to be a true Christian in 21st century Western civilization than it has ever been. We don't have to worry about being thrown to lions, because we all give ourselves willingly to another sort of beast. It's easy to toss around words like consumerism and excess and materialism, but I get the sense that most of you tune that stuff out, you've heard it so many

times. The reason I get that sense is that it's easy for **me** to tune it out, too. Our society has been so incredibly successful in remaking its religion, we are, all of us, seduced into the insidious and ever-present belief that more is better, that luxuries are necessities, even, I would argue, that we won't ever really die. We sanitize death, keep it hidden away, so that we can pretend that we'll live forever in lives of luxury that are fancier than that of kings and queens in bygone eras.

Our new Bishop Provisional, Clifton Daniels, who we call Bishop Dan, said something very interesting: the effect of sin, he said, is to numb us. Sin is an anesthetic. And we all get anaesthetized by our culture of consumption. It's impossible to overstate the sneaky, powerful influence that we have given to the "almighty dollar." God is almighty, money isn't, but look around us and try to believe that's really true.

Just two days after the attacks of September 11, Pope John Paul the II addressed the U.S. Ambassador, and this is what he said:

In the century now opening before us . . . the possibilities before the human family are immense, although they are not always apparent in a world in which too many of our brothers and sisters are

suffering from hunger, malnutrition, the lack of access to medical care and to education, or are burdened by an unjust government, armed conflict, forced displacement and new forms of human bondage. In seizing the available opportunities, vision and generosity are necessary, especially on the part of those who have been blessed with freedom, wealth and an abundance of resources.

in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt. 6:19-21)

Each of us can treasure God's love; we can treasure Jesus' promise that he will be with us, even to the end of the ages. We are not alone. We have strength for this journey. We can acknowledge that no, we won't live forever, but that our lives have meaning. Deep meaning. Meaning not defined by what we have, what we do, how smart or pretty or accomplished we are, but by God's love for us, our love for God, and the ways we show that love to the world.

Yes, you are going to die. I am going to die. But that's not terrible news. It's a call to get to work. It's a call to open our hearts and overflowing barns to the rest of the world. It's a call that Jesus gave in a similar passage in Matthew:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes, and where thieves do not break