

# 11<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

AUGUST 4, 2013

## TWO ARE BETTER THAN ONE

Pastor Jim Dunn

(Quote is from Rev. Rossow's book, Gospel Handles, his words on Luke 12:13-21 and my overall interpretation of the parable is heavily dependent on Kenneth Bailey)

### **Ecclesiastes 1:2,12-14; 2:18-29**

**2** Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

#### **The Vanity of Wisdom**

**12** I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. **13** And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. **14** I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

#### **The Vanity of Toil**

**18** I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, **19** and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. **20** So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, **21** because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. **22** What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? **23** For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

**24** There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, **25** for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? **26** For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

For someone who wrote a book of the Bible, the writer of Ecclesiastes sure sounds depressed. He says, "I hated all my work in which I labored under the sun." He says, "I turned about (that is, I called it quits) and gave my heart up to despair." He complains, "Because I must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it." But where's his business partner, his spouse, his son or daughter? Was there no one younger to toil alongside him, to not only inherit the fruits of his labor but to sweat with him, too. He uses the word "I" nine times in this passage. He sounds like he's all alone. Did he simply need to heed his own wisdom?

"Two are better than one," he writes later on in chapter 4. "If one falls down, his friend can help him up...if two lie down together, they will keep warm...though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves...two are better than one; because they have a good return for their work..." And we might add, then one does not have to feel like he's doing the work all by himself. Well, two are better than one. Wouldn't you agree?

In the parable read earlier (Luke 12:13-21), we heard about a man faced with a decision. He is a rich man, we're told in verse 16. He has not just one barn. He has barns (v.18). Obviously he believes two are better than one, at least when it comes to barns. He has a problem, and a decision to make. The harvest is so large; his multiple barns cannot hold it all. He could give some of the surplus to his field hands as a bonus. He could give the surplus to the poor. Certainly, he does not need it. He is already rich. So, whom does he go to for advice? His wife? His son? His friends? When it comes to big decisions, two are better than one, right? This man speaks only to himself.

In that culture in which Jesus told this parable, men make up their minds in community. They do their thinking among the elders of the village. But the man in Jesus' parable seems to trust no one. He seems to have no friends or cronies with whom he can exchange ideas. When he needs advice he can talk only to himself, as he does in verse 18 and in verse 19 when he says, "Soul, you have ample goods...relax, eat, drink and be merry."

The decision he makes by himself takes him down a path of thanklessness, selfishness, and shortsightedness. Could he have used some advice? Two are better than one, right?

In the reading we heard earlier from Paul's letter to the Colossian church, Paul says that the church is not Greek or Jewish, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian or Scythian, slave or free. The Gospel doesn't make one class of people higher than the others. It does not make one culture better than the others, or one taste in music better than any other, or one kind of household more desirable than any other. God doesn't play favorites. Then, should we? Should one congregation be all Greeks and another congregation be all Jews? Should a church have only one kind of person? Two are better than one, right?

A few weeks ago, a home was robbed in Crossville, Tennessee. A man and a woman came to the home of Stephen Amaral. They asked if the woman could take a skinny dip in his pool. Then, the man said he was leaving to get cigarettes and would be back later. Amaral allowed the woman to swim naked in the backyard pool, while he watched. But while he was distracted in the backyard, the man robbed the home of nearly \$1,000 in jewelry, as well as some cash, a keepsake handgun and some prescription drugs. Amaral, age 54, said he gave the 30-something woman a towel when she was done swimming. According to Amaral, he invited her to church, but she said she didn't have time for that. He did not even notice the theft until after the woman had already left. Now, if Amaral's wife had been home in this situation, do you think they would have been robbed? Two are better than one, right?

Still, even though the writer of Ecclesiastes wrote those words, "two are better than one, if one falls down, his friend can help him up," he fell down when it came time to put that wisdom into practice. He saw his work and his life as "mine." The way the man who built bigger barns saw his bumper crop as "mine." The same way we sometimes see the church as "mine."

The writer thought of handing his work on to someone else not as “two are better than one,” but almost like it was throwing it away. He says, “A person works wisely and industriously. Then, he must leave the accumulated fruits of his labor to another person who is nowhere near so wise or industrious or hard working as he is? Why, they’ll mess it up. They’ll waste what he has worked for.” But that kind of thinking has split families. Caused rifts between fathers and sons. Caused business relationships to go sour. That kind of thinking can exist also in the church. We can become fearful about who we hand the church on to. There’s much at stake! Our building, our Lutheran heritage. So, for example, that young white guy who smells as if he hasn’t had a bath in months – I’m not so excited about inviting him to church. So, then, maybe I don’t invite him or don’t make him feel welcome. Am I not forgetting that two are better than one? And thinking like the church is “mine,” something I have to protect? We can fall into a cynical way of thinking: “So, I turned about, I called it quits, and gave up my heart to despair, because sometimes a person *must hand on the church* to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it.”

Yet, if one falls down, his friend can help him up. “Come to think of it, isn’t that precisely what Jesus has done for you and me? We have fallen down, and He has helped us up. Jesus spent a lifetime on earth working wisely and industriously. He went about the land of Palestine doing good and being good, keeping every one of the Father’s Commandments perfectly. And what was the outcome? He left it all to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. He left it to you and me. Christ accumulated the fruits of His labors. He accumulated righteousness. And we, in the goodness and grace of God, through Jesus’ death and resurrection, through the faith the Holy Spirit has given us, inherit Jesus’ righteousness, we who have not toiled for it. Indeed, we could not toil for it even if we had wanted to.” (Rossow) Our Savior Jesus is a perfect example of a “man who has toiled wisely and industriously and has left it all to be enjoyed by someone (you and me) who did not toil for it.” That is not what the writer of Ecclesiastes was talking about when he wrote those words. But it’s exactly what God tells us in Ephesians 2:8-9.

Jesus lifted us up where we fell. The new heavens and new earth are our inheritance. Jesus lifted us up.

He lifts us up today. Two are better than one. If one falls down, his Friend can help him up. Jesus helps you and me up. Helps you and me up from cynical thinking to hope that He would give His righteousness to others, too: Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian and Scythian, bathed and un-bathed, regardless of class, color, culture, taste, odor, or type of household, no one better than the other, no one more desirable or less desirable than another.

Jesus lifts us up to see that Christ wants to be in all, that what He wants for Immanuel is a church for all. To put into practice this wisdom: Two are better than one. That we would welcome all to Immanuel, even dare I say, the woman who was naked in Stephen Amaral's pool. He did invite her to church. Would that we would also, though, hopefully, under different circumstances.

Amen