

“You’re So Vain”

Sermon – August 3, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

You’re so vain. You probably think this sermon is not about you.

With apologies to Carly Simon, that is what preachers sometimes think when they are preaching, particularly with a sermon of reproach.

I remember giving a pointed sermon years ago only to have one of the persons I was trying reach come up afterwards and say, “That was a great message! I hope people take it to heart!”

And I had to smile and say, “Thank you” while thinking, “You’re one of those people!” And don’t worry—it wasn’t one of you. Probably.

We see lots of vain people around these days on the public stage.

Vain in the sense of excessive and unwarranted pride, conceit, self-absorbed.

Vain in that they see themselves not only as always justified in their behavior, but even worse don’t see—or care—how their behavior or actions are hurting others.

But vain in that sense really comes from its original meaning of empty; worthless; having no substance, value or importance. And is often how we view vain people.

Today’s Old Testament passage from the book of Ecclesiastes discusses that kind of vanity.

Days like Christmas and Easter are moments when God’s dazzling light breaks through all darkness, but they come only once a year. The rest of the time we can often catch only a glimmer here and there, as we struggle through the demands, the tedium, the felt meaninglessness of life. It can seem all in vain.

So, here in the middle of Ordinary Time it is apropos for us to hear from this rarely heard passage from Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is a peculiar book. First, is the word itself.

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“Ecclesiastes” is a Latin transliteration of the Greek translation of the Hebrew word, *Qoheleth*, co HELL et.

Qoheleth literally means a “feminine speaker before an assembly.” But since verse one alludes to the speaker being King Solomon, the wisest man in the Hebrew bible, and that wisdom in the Old Testament, particularly in Proverbs is represented by a woman, using *Qoheleth* underscores the speaker in the book as being truly wise.

In the English-speaking world we translate *Qoheleth* as Preacher or Teacher of which I do both a bit of today.

The second peculiarity of the book is its generally depressing, enough to make you wonder why it’s even in the bible. Chapter 1, verse 2 begins with the Hebrew word *hebel*, which we typically translate as “vanity”, as in “to no avail”; “it’s all in vain.”

Hebel is also used in the Old Testament to mean “breath” or, metaphorically, “vapor”, like from a pot boiling on your stove that exists only for a moment and then disappears. That is, something ephemeral.

It can also be translated as “fleeting” or “futile”. *Hebel* is actually the Hebrew word we translate as Abel, the second son of Adam and Eve, whose fleeting life was extinguished by his brother Cain.

Thus, verse 2 can be translated as “vanities of vanities, all is vanity” or ““Ephemerality of ephemerality, all is ephemeral” or “futility of futilities, all is futile.”

Not really any positive connotations to say the least. And it doesn’t get any better.

Today’s lectionary reading consists of three selections from Ecclesiastes 1-2. They make two claims about the nature of human life: everything is ephemeral, and work cannot provide meaning.

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We know from Ecclesiastes 2:4–9 (not in today’s reading) that the Teacher is immensely wealthy. And yet that buys him nothing in the end, both literally and figuratively. No matter what, we all die, rich or poor, good or evil. And even if you have toiled hard and leave an estate or legacy for your heirs, who knows what they will do with it? You have no control over it.

And it’s the same over and over, from generation to generation. As chapter 1, verse 9 says (also not in our reading), “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.”

Nothing that one does will last. It’ll just be done again—if not by us, then by a future generation, maybe better, maybe worse.

In other words, what’s the point of it all?

As we read all of Ecclesiastes, however, we discover that Qoheleth, the Teacher, comes to a familiar conclusion, one he repeats in some form at least seven times in the book.

In light of all that he has discovered, he comes to believe that there is nothing better for humans than to eat, drink, and enjoy what we might have.

As chapter 8, verse 15 says, “So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat and drink and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.”

Now this is not a fatalistic philosophy of “you might as well as have fun, cuz you’re going die regardless.”

No, for Qoheleth, the Teacher, to eat, drink, and be merry is an act of faith toward God. It is being grateful for the life we have and enjoy it in its fullest.

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Today’s lesson from Colossians points us to this better way. If our self-serving, frantic striving leads us to emptiness and death, then as Colossians 3:2-4 says, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.”

Our vain lives find their meaning in Christ. Embracing the Teacher’s message is to acknowledge the truth of his claim: our end is, inevitably, death.

Our glory will not be in our works, our treasures, our fame or anything we may do—it will be in Christ when Christ’s glory is revealed.

And Colossians makes it clear that enjoying life means enjoy acting Christ-like. But it is not to have our head in the clouds. It is not a summons to neglect material reality and focus only on what is spiritual.

It does not mean abandoning the physical realm for the metaphysical, as some might think. On the contrary, setting one’s mind on things above means viewing all of God’s reality in light of God’s ultimate truth. It means seeing past deceptive appearances, past the false pretenses of those “powers and authorities” that would claim our allegiance and dwelling instead on the truth of Christ’s reign and the promise of new life in him.

When Colossians 3:5 says, “Put to death whatever in you is earthly,” it does not mean repudiating our bodily or material existence. Rather, it here refers to all that destructively consumes and corrupts God’s good creation, serving only capricious desires or the interests of a few.

Because those things only perpetuate dysfunction, creating yet further systemic damage within the biological and social networks that connect us.

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Christian faith is not centered on the pursuit and enjoyment of wealth, power, pleasure, and status but the acceptance of the divine gift that frees us to a life of humble service.

And that is in contrast to the man in Jesus’ parable today who planned to store up all his abundant goods so that he could say to his soul, “You have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

His foolishness was everything was “I”. The rich man’s land produced abundantly, yet he expresses no sense of gratitude to God or to the workers who have helped him plant and harvest this bumper crop. He didn’t pray to God for guidance on what to do with his new-found abundance. He didn’t think about ways he could have shared with the less fortunate. He only thought about himself.

It is all about priorities. It is about truly having God in our lives.

It is about how we invest our lives and the gifts that God has given us.

It is about how our lives are fundamentally aligned: either toward ourselves and our passing desires, or toward God and our neighbor, toward God’s mission to bless and redeem the world.

So don’t be vain, for your life is not in vain—it is in Christ, which makes us rich toward God.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.