



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, August 4, 2019**  
*The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost*

*Choral Eucharist*  
*at 11:00 a.m.*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Mathew Moretz, *Associate Rector*  
*on*  
Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23, Colossians 3:1-11, and Luke 12:13-21  
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### **Vanity and Wisdom**

Jesus told a story about a rich man, one with land that produces a great crop. This crop, it turns out, is enough to have him set for life. And Jesus tells us that the rich man, now even richer, doesn't speak to anyone else about this windfall, a family member, or one of his laborers. He doesn't speak to God, in gratitude or, perhaps, for guidance. He looks within. He speaks to his soul, saying, "Soul, I have no room to bestow my fruits. But, this will I do. I will pull down my many barns, and build even greater ones; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to you, Soul, after all this time, you can finally rest. Thou hast much goods now, laid up for many years. We did it! You and me. Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry."

This "richer" man (conjured up by Jesus) now felt that he had "enough." No matter his previous wealth, he never considered himself "at ease," he never considered himself "merry," he never considered himself having "enough" for that. But after having won the agricultural lottery, so to speak, he is able to breathe an existential sigh of relief, and he sets himself to securing that relief by building more buildings for his wealth, protecting them from the elements and thieves. But, before he can even begin to build, God comes to him. And it is not a pleasant visitation. He calls him a Fool! He tells the man that his windfall will be followed by an even greater fall, his very soul will be taken in the night!

And then God draws closer and asks him, "After that, whose shall all those things be? What will become of all those things for which thou hast provided so many barns? Will they be yours, or someone else's?"

I think we know the answer to this question. The answer hearkens back to the angst of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes in a portion of a sermon we just read: "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun" Why? Because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me."

Both God in Jesus' parable and the Preacher in Ecclesiastes focus on this deathly yet vital point: not only is one's life impermanent, but, as if to add insult to injury, the fruit of one's life is taken by someone else when one is gone, someone who can rest on those laurels, eating, and drinking, and making merry. Both readings seem to taunt with this imagery of some undeserving soul who is practically dancing on someone's grave in joy, for one person's death is now their windfall.

If this lurid train of spiritual reflection makes you uncomfortable, I sympathize. Who wants to think about this? Yet these readings fully intend to spur us through the gruesome process of really thinking through the unsentimental picture of what we really keep when we are gone. Like that Ghost of Christmas Future, they intend to lead us to our own graves,

and leave us bereft, at least bereft of earthly things, so that we might pursue heavenly things, instead, while our time on earth remains.

Early in life I remember being shown the tomb of some Egyptian pharaoh. I remember being taught to scoff at all of the stuff that was in the tomb: treasures, furniture, embalmed cats, all kinds of provisions that were intended to accompany him to the Other Side. And there they were, preserved for millennia, but they didn't belong to Pharaoh any more. They belonged to a museum. And his mummy, too, his gilded remains, they, belonged to a museum.

I scoffed then. But now I shudder. For even now, I forget that so much of what I am building up in this world, collecting, constructing, so much of who I am, will not go with me when I die. Even now, I sometimes live my life as if I were a Pharaoh, even though I know otherwise, I drift into a reverie, conveniently forgetting as I live my life that I very much won't be able to retain what I have unto eternity. And I think this colors my priorities, and I sleepwalk into a life that really doesn't hold up to the scrutiny that death demands.

Jesus brings out this scrutiny, not to be cruel. But to wake us up from our waking dream. Remember, he tells this story because a person comes to Him and demands that Jesus arbitrate a family dispute. The person seems to be a younger sibling, and he wants Jesus to compel his older brother to share the family inheritance. He can see beyond his father's death, it seems. But he can't see beyond his own. He can't see that the wealth he jockey's for will be another's one day. It is impermanent. Vanity that will be gone with the wind in a few decades.

And for the sake of that vanity, he contends with his brother, in a public fashion, no less, he disrupts his family, and he torment his own soul with his desire. He meets God face to face and this is the only thing he can think to talk about. Communion with God, communion with his brother, both are disrupted by his zeal for something that could be his for only a season. He cannot take his ease, he cannot be merry, he will not be at peace until his waking dream of having "enough" is satisfied. And even if it is satisfied, it will be gone before too long. And so Jesus tells him a story, reaching out through his fog to touch his heart, and reaching out through the ages to touch ours, so that he and we might know wisdom instead of vanity.

The wisdom of God is that there is a hidden reality that goes so much deeper than securing our finances or getting what we think we deserve after so much struggle under the sun. Remember how our Lord Jesus Christ said that it is more blessed to give than to receive? And, also that those who try to save their lives will lose it. The Preacher and the Rich Man and the Contending Brother were all seeking to have something and secure it, to save themselves by saving their wealth. But everything we have will be taken away from us. Yet, and here's the good news, everything we give, no thief can steal. For who can take anything from an empty hand? Everything we share in mutual love, not even death can snatch that from us. Every slight we pardon is a treasure that is secured in heaven.

The only things we truly "have" are the things we "don't have anymore" because they have been given, or forgiven. In this, they become ours forever, because we participated in the life of God, our empty hands in their emptying became God's hands.

Our true work doesn't lead to financial security. Our true work is to be caught up in the communion of the saints, to be engaged in the forgiveness of sins, investing in these spiritual possessions that bear hidden fruit, fruit that can be ours even in our poverty. For God's gifts don't rely on us having "enough," or being secure, or getting a fair shake. We may be poor, imperiled, and downtrodden. If we are well-off, we may still be haunted by the fear of that.

But as long as we have breath, we can give something of ourselves. As long as we have life, we can forgive something gone wrong, releasing that burden from the face of the earth. And in that holy commerce, we become rich in God, not only after this life, but in this very moment, so that even if our lives are demanded of us, even if it were tonight, we will have found our burdens eased, we will have eaten, drunk, and made merry at this holy table, and we will have already begun to be citizens of the Eternal City of God.