

The Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23
<i>Response</i>	If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 90:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14 AND 17
<i>Second Reading</i>	Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 2:13-21

The 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C gives us yet another passage that is unique to the Gospel of Luke. It's one of Jesus' parables, the Parable of the Rich Fool. This takes place in Luke 12:13-21. So let's read the gospel and try to unpack it together. It says this:

One of the multitude said to him, "Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?" And he said to them, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

As always, there's a lot going on here. Notice, the setting of this particular parable takes place when someone from the crowd steps out and asks Jesus to (basically) act as a kind of arbiter between him and his brother. He says "make my brother divide the inheritance with me." Now, in the ancient world as today, when a father of a family (or a parent) would die, the question of inheritance, of who would inherit (not just the possessions but in particular the land that was left over), was often a source of division and conflict between siblings. And if you ever had to be the executor of a will or oversee taking care of someone's property after they've died, you will know this frequently becomes a time for all kinds of division and conflict between the surviving members of the family. Families can be torn apart over the question of who gets the inheritance.

So this man steps out of the crowd and says to Jesus to act as a kind of a judge or an arbiter between him and his brother, and Jesus responds as usual with a question: "Man, who made me judge over you (or divider) over you?" So he kind of rebukes the guy for his question but then he follows up that mild rebuke with a deeper question and an exhortation to the crowd and to his disciples, namely to beware of all covetousness. Now, the New American Bible here translates this as "beware of all greed." That's a good translation, although the Greek word (once again, as always, the Greeks are a little more expressive) is *pleonexia*. It does mean covetousness, it does mean greed, but one of the most prominent dictionaries in the New Testament defines it as following: "the state of desiring to have more than one's due; insatiableness." So *pleonexia*, it means a kind of super abundance or desire to have more than you need, which of course is what greed is all about. It's a very expressive Greek word; it's very rich — no pun intended, I guess it was kind of intended — Greek word there about greed. So Jesus is saying, beware of all *pleonexia*.

And you might think, "Well how do I know that's what he means?" Well just look at the next line. You don't have to know Greek, you just have to read it in context. Beware of all *pleonexia*; for a man's life does not consist in what? The abundance of his possessions. So it's an attachment to this kind of super abundance of possessions. Not the necessities of life, but an over-abundance, an insatiableness to acquire more and more and more possessions. That's what Jesus is getting at here. That's the root problem that he's driving at. So, what he's trying to teach the disciples here is that's now what life is about, just getting more and more and more and more stuff. It's not about *pleonexial*; it's not about wealth.

And in order to illustrate that truth, in order to illustrate that moral truth, Jesus uses the parable of the rich fool as an example. So he gives a story of a rich man whose crops...again, think of an agricultural society...who get rich primarily through agricultural surplus. It's a very different economy than what we have today. So his land brought full of plentifully and he thought, "well wait, what am I going to do with all of these crops? What do I do with all of this surplus food? Oh, I know. I'll tear down my barns, I'll build a larger one; I'm going to store all of this grain and all of this good up and then how am I going to live?" What does he say? He's talking to himself here, the RSV does it right. In the Greek it literally says "soul", which means he's talking to himself like "self" (it is like somebody looking in the mirror) "self, you have ample goods laid out for many years, take your ease, eat, drink and be merry." So what vices does the rich man give in to? Gluttony: eat, drink, be merry. That means feast sumptuously every day and then take your ease. In other words, no more labor. The rich man's surplus in wealth leads him to sloth (laziness) and also to gluttony. He's just going to live a life of eating and drink and being merry, that's his plan for his life. And in the midst of that God says, "You fool, you're going to die tonight. And when you're dead, who's things will these be? Who is all of this stuff, who are these possessions going to belong to?" And then the final line at the end of the parable, and Jesus will frequently do this, it's called the *nimshal* in Hebrew. It's the point of the parable. You will have the parable and then sometimes he'll give a *nimshal*, he'll give the "upshot", would be another way to translate it; a basic point that illustrates and clarifies what the parable was all about. "So is he who lays up treasure to himself and isn't rich toward God."

So what's Jesus doing here? He's giving two kinds of wealth. There is the rich fool who lays up treasure in what kind of manner? A selfish manner. It's all for himself; he lays up a treasure for himself. But then the other category, implicitly, is the wise person. What does the wise person do? He still accrues wealth but he is rich toward God. That's the difference. So he's setting up a contrast here. So you can see here that, ultimately, both of these teachings, the response to the man who asks for Jesus to divide the inheritance and then the parable, the upshot of both of them is to teach the disciples about the nature of true wealth and the true meaning of life. True wealth is spiritual wealth, it's being rich toward God, and then secondly, earthly wealth is not what life is all about. A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. So you need to beware of the desire (the very human desire) to devote your energy and to devote your life to accruing more and more and more possessions. Alright, so that's the gospel for today.

Now let's go back to Ecclesiastes. The Old Testament reading for today is an awesome compliment to the gospel because it's one of my favorite books in the Old Testament. If you like Winnie the Pooh, Ecclesiastes is the Eeyore of the Old Testament. It's the most depressing book. If you're a melancholic soul like myself, this is your book. It is just so depressing; it's so sad, but it's beautiful in its melancholy. So I love Ecclesiastes, it's a fantastic book. And in this case, the Old Testament reading for today gives us a section from the first two chapters; it gives us the opening verses of Ecclesiastes and then selects a few verses specifically on the vanity of earthly wealth. And you'll easily figure out, once I read it, how this connects with the parable of the rich fool. So let's just go through that together.

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

Then the lectionary skips all the way down to Ecclesiastes 2:21-23, which says this:

[S]ometimes a man who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by a man who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and strain with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of pain, and his work is a vexation; even in the night his mind does not rest. This also is vanity.

Ok, very uplifting words there from the book of Ecclesiastes. So let's just unpack them together. The first thing that's absolutely essential to understand when it comes to this first reading is the meaning of the word "vanity." Now this is the traditional translation of the opening lines of the book of Ecclesiastes. "Vanity of vanities...everything is vanity." People have probably heard that before. The problem with that translation is that in English, the noun "vanity" has come to be used more with reference to pride or a disordered self-love; in other words, a person being vain. Like the famous song, "You're so vain, you probably think this song is about you." I know you've heard that; I grew up in the 70's listening to that on the radio. When we think of someone being vain, or if we think of vanity, we might think of *Vanity Fair*, the famous novel, or the magazine that stole the title of that novel. So the idea of focusing on image, focusing on appearances, someone who's self-absorbed, someone who's prideful, someone who's egotistical; that's what we think of when we hear the word "vanity". That's not what Ecclesiastes is referring to; it's not that kind of vanity. The English translation of the word vanity in Ecclesiastes is

rooted in the terminology of doing something in vain, or doing something in a futile manner, or doing something in a way that isn't going to be efficacious; it's "in vain'." That's the meaning of this term. So you can see this in the Hebrew behind it. The Hebrew word translated vanity here is *hebel*. And I'll give you a parallel from the Book of Job that will give you an idea of what this means. The word *hebel* is literally defined as a vapor, a mist or a breath; like a "breath of the lungs". So in Job 7:16, Job says:

I loathe my life; I would not live for ever.

Let me alone, for my days are [*hebel*] a breath.

So what is Job saying when he says that his "days are a breath" (or you could translate it, "my days are vanity")? He's talking about the fleeting nature of his life, about the fact that there's a sense in which, because his life is so short, all that he does is vanity. It's all a passing. It's all a breath or a mist or a vapor. It's a passing thing. So when Ecclesiastes begins by saying, "*hebel of hebel, all is hebel*", what it means is that everything in this world is passing. It's all, in a sense, done in vain because it's so fleeting, it's so ephemeral. With that prelude in mind, what Ecclesiastes goes on to do in the first couple of chapters is give examples of just how ephemeral, just how fleeting, and just how passing all of the good things of this world that people chase after really are. So whether it's the pleasures of the flesh, the pleasures of food and drink, the pleasure of wealth; all these things which traditionally Solomon is associated with (because the book is traditionally associated with and attributed to Solomon), all of that earthly good is passing. It's all *hebel*. It's all just a breath. And so the lectionary, what it does is it skips down to verse 21, where Ecclesiastes is giving an example of how fleeting and how vain earthly labor and earthly wealth is.

So with that background in mind, you can look at the verses again. It basically describes the fact that when a person has worked to acquire wisdom and knowledge and skill, he's going to leave everything that he acquires on the basis of that skill to someone who didn't work for it. It says "this also is *hebel* and a great evil." So he's talking about the fact that a person can spend their whole life, in our times as in antiquity, accruing wealth and then the second they die, it's going to go to someone else who didn't do a thing to earn it. Whether it is that person's children, or the state, or the government (through taxation or whatever it might be), all of it is left behind. "You can't take it with you" is the famous proverb there. Now what it's getting at then is, what's the point!? That's what Ecclesiastes is doing. What's the

point then. If everything that I've worked for and all that I possess is going to be left to someone who didn't do a thing to earn it; then isn't it just in vain? "What has a man for all the toil and strain that would put you towards beneath the sun? All his days are for the pain and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his mind does not rest." So if you read the fuller context of Ecclesiastes 2, you'll see that, in particular, what the book is highlighting is the anxiety that comes with wealth. The book will talk about the fact that the poor man, the laborer, the day laborer, when he's done with his hard day's work, he just sleeps like a log. He sleeps a peaceful and restful sleep. But the rich man, the wealthy man, the wise man who has put so much energy and effort into acquiring all these possessions, his possessions begin to (in a sense) possess him, and he can't even get a goodnight's sleep. He can't even rest at night because the anxiety that comes with ownership robs him of the most simple pleasures of life: namely, a goodnight's sleep, a goodnight's rest. "This too is *hebel*", Ecclesiastes is saying. This anxiety over earthly possessions is also in vain. It's also a breath, a mist, a vanity, because the moment you die it's all gone, and you can't take it with you and it's going to belong to someone else. So you can see here the parallel very clear between the rich man who thinks that once he has all of these possessions, he's now safe and he can just eat and drink and be merry and all will be well (in the gospel parable that Jesus uses), and then the rich man in the book of Ecclesiastes who devotes everything to this vain pursuit of acquiring all this wealth that's not going to be his the second he passes away. It's all fleeting, it's all passing, it's all vanity. So that's the parallel there between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

And so in this case, it's beautiful, the responsorial psalm for the day that the Church has given us is Psalm 90. And the motif (or the theme) that's at the heart of this psalm is that life is short and that true wisdom comes from knowing to number your days. In other words, living life aware of the fact that this life is very brief, that it's not all that there is, and that the Lord is ultimately in charge of our lives. So I'll just read a few verses from this very beautiful psalm. It's psalm 90. I'll just read verses 3-6 and then verse 12 and following. So it says this, the psalmist is praying to God, verse 3, it says:

Thou turnest man back to the dust,
and sayest, "Turn back, O children of men!"
For a thousand years in thy sight
are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.

Thou dost sweep men away; they are like a dream,
like grass which is renewed in the morning:
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

Alright, so pause there. Notice what the psalmist is doing. It's comparing the life-span of a human being to the eternal character of God. So for someone who always is, is now and always shall be, namely the Lord, our lives are like grass. They're so fleeting, it's like grass that grows in the mornings (sprouts in the morning) and then withers by the evening. That's how quickly our lives pass. And then it goes on to actually say that in verse 9 and following. It says:

For all our days pass away under thy wrath,
our years come to an end like a sigh.
The years of our life are threescore and ten,
or even by reason of strength fourscore;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.

And then in verse 12:

So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom.

So here we go again, the contrast between foolishness in the parable and wisdom in the psalm. What is the nature of a wise person? According to the psalm, it's someone who knows that life is short; it's someone who has perspective on human life that recognizes that in the grand scheme of things our lives are like the grass: here today, gone tomorrow. And by the way, I can't help but...let me do a little soap box real quick. Notice that in Psalm 90, which is thousands of years old, what is human life expectancy? What does it say here? Our lives are three score and ten, or by reason of strength fourscore. In other words, our lives are about 70 years ordinarily, and if you're strong, you'll live until your eighties, alright. I bring this up because over the years I've had either students or I've seen it on television this idea that in antiquity the life span of a person was dramatically shorter and that they only expected to live thirty or thirty five years. So when someone was 20 they were middle-aged or something. That is absurd and completely erroneous. Please, if someone tells you that, just say "why don't you go read the Bible, Psalm 90." It's very clear. In antiquity, people expected to live about seventy years, and eighty if you're

strong. So maybe you could say today that we expect to live about eighty years and ninety if you're strong, but life expectancy is basically the same. It was not that much dramatically shorter in antiquity. People who say that just haven't read enough ancient literature. There are plenty examples of people living into their eighties and nineties. Even St. John the Apostle, for example, is regarded as living until the time he was one hundred. Ok, end of soap box.

Also you might think, well why do people say that? It's because they confuse the difference between a death mean and a life expectancy. So a mean (the average life expectancy) was brought dramatically down statistically because so many people died in childhood or they died young. But that has nothing to do with life expectancy. In other words, how long did ancient people expect to live? They did not expect to live thirty five years. They expected to live seventy years and eighty if you're strong. That's what the psalm is reflecting here, ancient life expectancy. So I just bring this up because sometimes people might think, "Oh, they even thought of life as more fleeting than we do." That's just not the case, alright. In the ancient world, they are expected to live about as long as we expect to live today. End of soap box, ok, so I'm done with that. I had to get that off my chest. Alright, so please don't say that anymore if you have been of that opinion. Now with that done, let's go back to the psalm. What do we need to do? "Teach us to number our days." The wise person recognizes how short life is. And then there's one final prayer here that's in verse 17, in which the wise person says:

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and establish thou the work of our hands upon us,
yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

Now, in a little archaic expression, what does that mean? The psalm ends in saying my life is short, so Lord I trust you to establish the work of my hands. So it doesn't mean that human beings don't labor. Human beings are called to labor. If you look in Genesis 1, Adam is put in a garden to till it and to keep it. In other words, to work it and to garden. So labor is a valuable and even essential part of the human condition. Work in itself is good. However, work is a means to an end. It's not the end itself. Human beings aren't made to work. They are made to have communion with God. And so what the psalmist is saying is that all the work of my life, I hand it over to you. I order it to you, God. I offer it to you and thereby show that my work is not in idle, my work is not my God, my labor is not my God, the wealth that I acquire from my labor is not what I was made for; I am made for you. I'm

ultimately ordered to you. Which by the way, that's why animal sacrifice is so important in the Old Testament. That's why tithing was so important in the Old Testament. You would take the first root of your crop. You take the firstlings of your flock. You take the tithe of your possessions and you would give them to the Temple. You would offer them to God on the altar as a way of showing that everything I have is yours, Lord. Everything I possess I got from you and so I offer it back to you because you are my ultimate end. You are what I was made for. I wasn't made to give myself to these earthly things. They are meant to sustain me, they are good in themselves, but all that's ultimately ordered toward God as the final end, as we would say in Thomistic philosophy. But that's what the psalmist is expressing here. Wisdom means recognizing that life is short and taking my labor and offering it to God as my ultimate end, as my ultimate purpose, as my ultimate reason for existence.

Ok, so with all of that in mind, let's bring it full circle to Jesus' parable of the Rich Fool. What's the difference between the rich fool and the person who is rich toward God? Well the fool thinks that by having an abundance of earthly possessions he's secured happiness for himself, when he forgot that the basic truth is that life is fleeting and life is short. That's why he says "you fool, tonight your soul is demanded of you and all these possessions, whose will they be?" So he was foolish because he didn't have an eternal perspective about his labor, about his property and about his wealth. By contrast, Jesus says (he's calling his disciples and he's teaching people in the audience) to be "rich toward God". And the Greek there is interesting, *eis theon ploutōn*. The preposition *eis* literally means "toward". It has a directional force to it. So how do I be rich toward God? I order the possessions, the things that I have, I order them to God and not rich to myself. What did the rich man do? He laid up treasure for himself (as Jesus says), but you should be rich toward God. So notice the different movement there. That's in Luke 12:21.

So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

Note the two different movements there. One, the wealth is ordered to me; the other, it's ordered to God. That's the difference between foolishness and wisdom.

In closing then, what do we make of this particular parable in the living tradition of the church? In this case, one of my favorite early Church Fathers, St. Basil the Great, who was one of those so called Cappadocian fathers — these were 4th Century Christian writers who helped define the doctrine of the Trinity during a lot of the debates that were taking place in the 4th Century over the Trinity. St. Basil of

Caesarea — he was in Caesarea, but he becomes known as Basil the Great — he actually had homilies on wealth. This was a big theme in early Christianity. How do Christians deal with the issue of property and possessions and wealth? And in his homily, St. Basil the Great uses the parable of The Rich Fool as an example to how Christians should relate to earthly possessions. So let's listen to what he has to say about what it means to be "rich toward God.":

[W]hat do we find in this man? A bitter disposition, hatred of other people, unwillingness to give. This is the return he made to his Benefactor. He forgot that we all share the same nature; he felt no obligation to distribute his surplus to the needy. His barns were full to the bursting point, but still his miserly heart was not satisfied. Year by year he increased his wealth, always adding new crops to the old. The result was a hopeless impasse: greed would not permit him to part with anything he possessed... You who have wealth, recognize who has given you the gifts you have received... You are the servant of the good God, a steward on behalf of your fellow servants. Do not imagine that everything has been provided for your own stomach. Take decisions regarding your property as though it belonged to another. Possessions give you pleasure for a short time, but then they will slip through your fingers and be gone, and you will be required to give an exact account of them. "What am I to do?" It would have been so easy to say: "I will feed the hungry, I will open my barns and call in all the poor..."²

So notice, Basil does three things that are really important here. First, he hones in on the fact that part of the rich man's problem was that he wasn't satisfied with the earthly possessions. In other words, he didn't just get what he needed, he had more than he needed. He was driven by *pleonexia*, by greed. And you could see this in the world all around us. How much is enough money? Well, there's never enough money. How many possessions are enough possessions? There's never enough. I don't know if you've ever seen any of these television shows about hoarders, the people who have this disorder where they just acquire more and more and more things. Well, that disorder resides in all of our hearts in some way shape or form. It's in concupiscence,; the desire to possess more and more things, and the heart is never satisfied with those earthly possessions because they're all finite. And ultimately what our hearts are made for is the infinite God. There's no number

² Basil, *Homilies on Riches* [trans. E. Barnecut], p. 104-105

of finite possessions that are ever going to satisfy the desire of the heart. So it becomes a disordered love of possessions or greed. That's the first point.

Secondly, notice Basil also points out the fact that man treats his wealth as if it's all for him. He never even stops to consider whether God has blessed him so that he could bless others. What does he say? "I'm going to fill up my barn..." and then he's completely self-focused. "Soul, eat, drink, take leisure, be merry, rest." You've got everything you need. This is very similar to the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. Remember, the rich man, it doesn't say he was an idolater, it doesn't say he was an adulterer, it doesn't say he bore false witness in court; he doesn't break any of the commandments explicitly. What does he do? He neglects to feed and care for the poor man who is lying on his doorstep. He fails gravely in love of neighbor. Well the rich fool does the same thing. He thinks all this food and this wealth is just for him and it doesn't even occur to him that there might be someone in need. Which again, in a 1st Century context, the poor were everywhere. There was ready access to the poo. Jesus says this, "the poor you always have with you, but you don't always have me." So the rich man here misses the opportunity to show charity to the poor because he's so focused on himself.

And then third and finally, Basil points out the fleetingness of life. Look, possessions are going to give you pleasure for a short time, but eventually they're going to slip through your fingers, they're going to be gone and you will have to give an account of them. And this is the final aspect of this that's really important, the idea of the particular judgment. What happens in the parable? He dies. "Fool, this night your soul is required of you." And what Basil is saying here is that implied in that is that we (get ready for this) will all have to give an account of stewardship. What did we do with the possessions that we have? How did we order the blessings God has given us? Whether it's in the form of money or land or clothing, whatever it might be, books; what do you with your possessions? How do you order them? Are you laying up treasure for yourself or are you rich toward God and toward your neighbor? And what Basil is saying is that the easy answer to the man's question, "what am I to do?" is, "open the barns and feed the poor." That would've been the right thing to do in order to show his love of neighbor. But he's so in love with himself and with his stuff that he can't see it. So in closing then, this parable to me really brings up the question of, are we living our lives as disciples of Jesus according to the wisdom of God, when it comes to wealth, or are we acting like the rich fool? And so the prayer for today from the Psalm is "Lord, teach us to number our days and you establish the work of our hands."