

A Sermon by the Reverend Deacon Crystal J. C. Hardin

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (C)

Sunday, August 4, 2019

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Psalm 49:1-11

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

Given its success in a multitude of tongues and across generations, most of you are probably familiar with the children's classic, "The Little Prince." But for those who aren't, I'll do my best to provide a summary.

It begins with a crash in the desert. Where an aviator, facing long odds of survival, encounters a strange young person – a wisp of a child, with curly golden hair and a laugh that sounds like a million little bells. This is the Little Prince. He is full of sadness, but also love, and joy, and understanding.

Over time, we learn where the Little Prince came from – a tiny asteroid named B-612, no bigger than a house. On it are three even smaller volcanoes, which only come up to his knees, and a few intrusive plants. Other than that, his life is quiet, content, and consistent. That is, until the day the rose appeared. She is one of a kind, because he has never seen one like her. He falls in love with this rose immediately, and cares for her as best he can.

He eventually leaves his tiny asteroid behind, and with it his rose, with whom he has fought and grown frustrated. And yet, it is not his anger really that has driven him away, but the knowledge that he has fallen in love with something so fragile and fleeting as a rose in such a dangerous and unforgiving world.

What is the point in love if it will lead only to despair?

The Little Prince, in many ways, finds kinship with the book of Ecclesiastes.

*Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity and a chasing after the wind.*

The voice speaking here, the Teacher, begins in what seems to be a place of weariness, or despair, or frustration, or even anger depending on how you read it.

Perhaps it even strikes our raw hearts differently today than it would have had before the violent events of this weekend.

*I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven, the Teacher proclaims. And yet, in doing so, he concludes that it is ultimately an unhappy business that God has given human beings to be busy with.*

Here is the despair that Ecclesiastes might best be known for – the suspicion that nothing worthwhile can come of our earthly strivings; that all is futile.

The Teacher proclaims that *All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing or the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be . . . there is nothing new under the sun.*

The Little Prince takes a similar journey. He will ultimately arrive on Earth, but not before stopping at several other planets, each inhabited by a single, lonesome person.

The King

The Conceited Man

The Drunkard

The Businessman

The Lamplighter

The Merchant

All of them in name have been reduced to their function and all are terribly preoccupied with a singular task for all of the wrong reasons. They are busy with an unhappy business to the tune of Ecclesiastes.

The King, who is obsessed with power, but has none. His purple robe flowed so abundantly we are told that it essentially took up his whole planet, leaving no room for much else, including others.

He is a King on a planet of One.

The Drunkard, who drinks to forget his shame and is ashamed because he drinks.

The Merchant, who peddles efficiency at the great cost of simple pleasures.

“With these pills that quench thirst,” he tells the Prince, “you can save fifty-three minutes in every week.”

To which the Prince responds, “If I had fifty-three minutes to spend as I liked, I should walk at my leisure toward a spring of fresh water.”

And, finally, there is the Businessman.

The Businessman, like so many others and, perhaps, like us, is certain that he has power that he doesn't. For example, he believes he owns the stars simply because he counts them. As he tells the Prince,

“When you find a diamond that belongs to nobody, it is yours. When you discover an island that belongs to nobody, it is yours. When you get an idea before anyone else, you take out a patent on it: it is yours. So with me: I own the stars, because nobody else before me ever thought of owning them.”

Here is a man who thinks he owns the stars, and yet, we are told, he never actually looks at them.

If this reasoning seems silly or childish, here is a more realistic rendering.

*The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops? Then 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; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'*

Here is a man on a planet all his own. Or, so it seems. It is his land, this land of the rich man. And, he thinks to himself, what should I do? I will do this. I will pull down. I will store. I will say to MY soul.

He is singularly focused on self.

The Rich Fool and the Businessman are not too distant of cousins it would seem.

The Businessman believes he owns the stars. The Rich Man believes he owns the land, and all that comes from it. And even more troubling, and yet not that far removed, he believes he owns his soul.

At the end of the day, the idea of owning stars, of mastering them, of keeping them for oneself, is no more ludicrous than the idea of owning land. Certainly it is no more ludicrous than the idea of owning a Soul, even if it is one's own.

And yet, we pursue control as much as we can. We are, in many ways, like the Businessman and the Rich Fool and perhaps, for a time, like the Teacher in Ecclesiastes. In the face of a world that is broken, a world of finitude and fragility, a world that can leave us anxious and fearful, we seek the illusion of control. Control of others. Control of ourselves. Control of time. Control of resources. Control even of our own Souls.

But, in the end, we can actually control so little. And, we know it. Or, at the very least but perhaps more importantly, we feel it. This is, for me, especially true today after waking to the news of El Paso and Dayton. What then is the point of trying so hard when there are no guarantees? When

there is such violence in the world? When, as Ecclesiastes suggests, the same fate befalls the wise and the foolish and everyone in between?

This is, in part, what the Little Prince wants to know. He wants to know the truth. Not so much what is actual versus what is a lie, but what is real. What is real and essential in a dangerous world where what one is called to love is fragile and finite.

Ecclesiastes is after the same. The Teacher goes to the ends of the earth to see all, only to return ultimately with no wisdom more valuable than what he first learned as a child at home: “Fear God and keep His commandments.” The Teacher arrives in the end at his beginning: God, and he takes the posture of complete humility, marked by grounded-ness and open-handed receptivity to all that life might bring.

Life is a gift. He seems to say. Receive it.

This is real. This is what is essential.

We cannot control it. We cannot predict it. We cannot keep out darkness in its many forms.

But, in its chaos and unpredictability and even in its darkness there is also joy, and light, and care, and love made all the more precious perhaps by its fragility.

There are roses that will ultimately die, but while they live they will be the light of our lives. And it is this love that we have for fragile things that comes from God, the ultimate lover of fragile things: us.

Perhaps the Teacher in Ecclesiastes is right – perhaps there is nothing new under the Sun;

and isn't that too a blessing. *For all things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.*

Amen.