

Proper 13, Year C
August 3, 2025

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

I think it's pretty safe to say that the author of Ecclesiastes – the Teacher, also known as Qoheleth - was having a bad day: everything I have done, everything I do, everything I will do is as if it were nothing. My accomplishments of the past will or already have been forgotten, what I am doing today is so small and insignificant and is over-shadowed by much greater acts by much greater individuals, and anything I do tomorrow will die and be forgotten when my body is laid to rest. And if anything is to be gained by anything I do or have done, someone else will take and receive the credit.

A similar sense of despair was picked up by Friedrich Nietzsche and others in the 19th century and dubbed “nihilism,” nothingness: there are no rules that matter, there is no moral code of any significance, no behavioral boundaries, there is, in fact, no God. What a miserable void to wake up to every morning!

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void.

We humans long for a sense of meaning, a sense of order, things in their place, a sense of boundary. When we brought our 3-year-old son for an interview at the local Montessori school, the woman-in-charge explained the little mats each child had which were neatly rolled up and stored in a set of cubby holes: when a child decided on an activity, he located his mat and placed it on the floor with his chosen activity. This signaled to everyone that this was where he was going to be – boundaries established by the mat – and he was free to work, experiment, whatever, and even invite a partner to join in his process of creation.

Out of the formless void, God created and set the sun and moon and stars in their courses.

If we entertain thoughts that everything we do is meaningless and it doesn't matter what we do, that there are no moral or behavioral boundaries, I think that Nietzsche is pretty close to the target: God is dead! The bit of God that is within us is dead. And yes, we are dead.

And how that must sadden God.

What we do matters a great deal. How we treat one another matters a great deal.

Scientists, psychologists, doctors are finding clear evidence of “ancestral trauma;” the

fields of Behavioral Genetics and Developmental Psychology see proof that things that happened in the lives of our ancestors carry through for generations, just as good or bad eating habits or disease. How we speak to one another, the tone of voice we use when we correct each other or disagree, the hurt we cause – all reverberate through generations.

It does matter how we treat one another.

If we lead lives of compassion and mercy for others as well as for ourselves, we are pleasing in the sight of God. The help we need is in the Name of the Lord. Prayer works. At the end of the day, let us think on the things that have happened: is it, as Qoheleth says, “an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with”? Is everything we have done over the past several hours of this day “chasing after wind”? Was going to Hannaford’s useless and motivated by vanity, even though in addition to shopping for home groceries I had a chance to let someone who had a quart of milk cut the line? Was smiling and saying “hi” and “thank you” to the guy who collects the grocery carts a waste of time? When I got grumpy at the woman who honked at me as I was backing up from my parking place, couldn’t I have cut her some slack and said a prayer of thanks for not bumping into my passenger door? It matters what we say to others; it matters what we think of others. It is not chasing the wind to care. I don’t believe the work my son and daughter-in-law did for USAID and TetraTech or the work folks have done for FEMA is vanity and useless: I believe it is God’s work. I believe whatever one or two of us can do to demonstrate our profound regret when a person or people or nation or race are treated unfairly - either centuries ago, or happening before our very eyes today - is a task God is urging us towards: this is the busyness God has assigned us. After all, which is more Christ-like: to leave someone with a sense of hopelessness and emptiness or a feeling of warmth, love and welcome?

My six-year-old grandson is past the “why”, on the threshold of the “I know that” stage and year-and-a-half-old Phoebe hasn’t verbalized the “why” yet. So I will ask: why shouldn’t we think everything we do will eventually fade away as if we had accomplished nothing? why does it matter how we treat one another?

*Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man to till it and keep it.
Hallowed be thy name, O Lord God;
May thy kingdom come,
And may thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*