

Living the Good Life
Sermon for Oct. 17, 2021

Readings for the 21st Sunday after Pentecost:

Ecclesiastes 5:10–20

Hebrews 4:1–13 (14–16)

Mark 10:23–31

Old Testament Reading: Ecclesiastes 5:10-20 (Riches are Meaningless)

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep. There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand. This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger. Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil — this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

Holy Gospel: Mark 10:23-31

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

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A recent article in Forbes Magazine focused on research out of San Diego University that reported what mattered most in life to the generation of Millennials. And while the article tried to make a big deal out of it, the results of that study were not all that surprising. At least not to me.

The big reveal boils down to three things, (three non-negotiables; to quote the article) that are necessary to live “the good life” at least, according to the Millennials.

The article states... *“The younger generations were, on average, less interested in “intrinsic” goals and more interested in “extrinsic” ones – especially the millennials. They viewed “**money, fame, and image**” as being among the more important life-goals, whereas they saw aspirations “concerned with self-acceptance, affiliation, and community as less important.”*

If you find that being *NOT very concerned with self-acceptance* is somewhat surprising, because I did, then you need to read the study, which I tried to do, but it was written for academics, and except for the conclusions, it was profoundly boring. Suffice it to say that their greater concern for self-image is not grounded in self-reflection or even self-esteem, but in soliciting the opinions of and gaining the acceptance of *others*.

But really, is this information all that earth-shaking? I mean what generation HASN'T assumed that the keys to a good life are Fame and/or Fortune? That's not surprising. Not at all. And neither are those things at the bottom of the list of priorities... Relationships with self, family and the community. What generation hasn't listed those things as a low priority? That the Millennials are MORE inclined to value fame and fortune, as a cohort, may simply be a factor of being the first generation to “come of age” under the influence of Social Media. It doesn't make them unique, by the way, but we really haven't seen a generation like this since the Renaissance...a generation who grew up under the influence of new ideas, new technology and new frontiers.

SO this isn't a slam against the Millennials. It's a reminder to all generations that the love of money is the root of all evil. It's a reminder that fame is fleeting, and that you need to be able to live with yourself. And that no one lays on their deathbed wishing they had spent more time at work or wishing they spent more time saying, “Look at me”.

In the end, what matters MOST is the love we shared... or didn't. That's what makes for a good life... or NOT. And we KNOW this. It's obvious. But being sinful, broken human beings, we either keep forgetting OR we keep fooling ourselves into thinking that money and fame is the quickest way to bring those things we LOVE into our lives. Regardless of all our experiences and cautionary tales that keep telling us -- that the good life can NOT be bought without paying a high price -- somebody HAS to pay.

That is the LAW of economics. And like the law of gravity, it can't simply be ignored. Nothing is free in this world... EVERYTHING comes with a cost. Even our salvation was paid for.

And that's why love is so important. Because with LOVE, we receive grace. And grace is getting what we don't deserve. Someone else takes the risk and makes the payments, and what we receive we receive freely as a gift. And if there is any payment at all for a gift, it comes in the form of gratitude.

I have to laugh when calling gratitude a payment, because it costs us nothing to be gracious.

NO... that is not true either. don't think one can be gracious without also being humble. And humility can cost us our pride. Our "right" to feel self-righteousness. Our precious self-mage. Our right to be angry, or be important or to get even.

Remember that we love because God first loved us. God loved us by showing us grace and mercy, and punishing his Son in our place, to pay the price for our sins. We receive this redemption by faith and we return His love, with grateful hearts.

Our Old Testament lesson calls the love of fame or money "Vanity"...

Vanity is the excessive belief in one's own abilities or attractiveness to others. Prior to the 14th century it did not have such narcissistic undertones, and merely meant futility. It's uselessness. Pointless. No one will find true happiness in the pursuit of these things. Wealth is a tool but true comfort and happiness is in the meaningful work we do and the time we spend with those who love each other.

Our Gospel lesson sees Peter asking Jesus for some assurance that they had given up enough to be considered worthy of his kingdom. And I have to smile at Jesus asking Peter what he has really given up? Is he deprived of house or home, land, animals or friends and family? He receives these things here and will also receive these things in his kingdom which has no end. To quote John Cougar... "Baby, you ain't missing a thing."

That's important, what Jesus says, because the fact is... we don't all get the good life here.

Sometimes it's because we miss out on it because of our own choices or mistakes. I think also of my brother-in-law, who through no fault of his own, did not exactly live the "Good Life." A degenerating disease took from him slowly the ability to move, and then even to breathe on his own. But although bed ridden, he was NOT left alone. His mother and father took extraordinary care of him. Wealth or fame wouldn't have made much difference for him. But the relationships meant everything. That he could smile as often as he did was remarkable. It would shame any able bodied person who complained about how bad they had it, how miserable *their* life was that they could only scowl when you met them.

John is in heaven with his Lord now. And he is set free from a difficult life. I hesitate to call it bad. And I couldn't really call it good. But it would have been terrible apart from his savior. It would have been vanity, useless and pointless.

I tell you this as a counterpoint to a message about trying to live the "Good Life" here. Apart from your Savior, it can not be done.

Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is **no one** who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

When Rev. Johannes Mengsteb was talking to me about going into the ministry, I remember arguing with him about what that would mean... I said, I don't want to leave my home or my friends. If I leave, I will not be coming back here. And I won't be seeing them anymore. I don't really want to leave my friends.

He said to me, matter of factly... God will give you new friends. I knew that was true. But that didn't make it better. I loved my old friends. That was going to be a cost. I wasn't sure I could pay it.

Since then, I have met another pastor in our synod. He was a Christian converted from Islam.

For him to become a pastor, it meant he would be leaving his mother and father, sister and brothers.

The stakes were even higher for him.

When Jesus says to his disciples, "follow me"... he doesn't demand anything less than that we relinquish our grip upon our sins, death and the world. In return he gives us life. And LOVE...

The article I told you about at the beginning of the sermon had other things to say...

And while the Millennials seem to believe that the way to achieve the "Good Life" was through "**money, fame, and image**," the sad reality is that anxiety, depression and loneliness are some of this generation's biggest challenges.

Why is it that each generation sees the allure of fame and fortune as the solution to all life's problems. And yet, as each generation discovers, the regrets that come with age show that neither of those two imposters are able to deliver what they promise.... And so the necessity of learning the same lessons OVER and OVER...

One of the ways of avoiding these things is through family. Compounding anxiety and depression and loneliness, one other problem for the millennials is that it's no secret. they are not fond of marriage as an institution. Therefore, they are waiting longer and longer to get married or have children; that is, if they get married at all. What does that mean for the foundation of the family and bond between family members, which provide the kinds of relationships that help keep us mentally and physically fit?

My stock message to all newlyweds is to embrace the **power of forgiveness** in their lives and marriages.

The power of forgiveness is the power to raise the dead to life... and it will heal you even when you don't happen to like each other. That happens. Sometimes we get angry or disappointed

and for a time we might not be able to say I love you. But being able to say "I FORGIVE YOU" is what will help change that.

If we love because God first loved us... then likewise we forgive, because we have been forgiven.