

Sunday, October 26, 2025

The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Evensong

4:00 pm

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A Sermon by

The Reverend Mark Brown, *Honorary Assistant*

on

Ecclesiastes 11 and 12; Matthew 22:34–46

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Vanity of Vanities?

I'll begin with a brief public service announcement. We'll be resuming our online Bible study this coming Friday (I'll be leading). If you're interested in joining, you can sign up on our web site. The topic is the Book of Ecclesiastes—our first reading this afternoon. It has an interesting back story, which I won't get into now, except to mention that it dates from the period after the exile at a time when Jewish communities were beginning to disperse around the Mediterranean world—so there are some traces of contact with Greek culture and philosophy.

It was actually a verse from our reading that led me to choose Ecclesiastes as a topic. It's a verse that could very well be a key to the whole book. It was a long reading and a lot to take in, so here's the verse again: "*The words of the wise are as goads*" "*The words of the wise are as goads.*"

That is, the sayings of the wise are meant to goad us into engagement— to provoke us into critical thinking and to encourage deeper reflection before coming to premature conclusions. The words of the wise are meant to provoke questions, perhaps even pushback.

Which may be a key to the whole book, which is basically a collection of short sayings: aphorisms, proverbs and catchy quips about life in general. But if the words of the wise are meant to provoke, perhaps—perhaps—we can't always take them completely at face value. So, if the wise man says, "*vanity of vanities, all is vanity*"—maybe we need to question whether we think that's actually the case.

Is it all vanity? No other book of the Bible seems to think that all of life is meaningless. Jesus didn't think all was vanity, devoid of meaning. Nor did Paul. Perhaps the wise man's saying that all is vanity was his way of goading us, provoking us into answering that for ourselves, as if to say, "well...what does it all mean"? If you think it means something, what does it mean?

At the very conclusion of the Book of Ecclesiastes (which we heard), the writer says this: *Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.* Keep God's commandments.

Keeping the commandments of God is the whole duty of human beings, it says. Which leads us right into the second reading, which is about those commandments of God: it comes in a conversation between Jesus and some Pharisees. Jesus often seemed to enjoy goading the religious professionals of his day.

(I can imagine the disciples of Jesus and the followers of the Pharisees standing by and shouting their approval when points were scored and zingers zinged—like a New York City mayoral debate—a little rowdy!)

In any event, Jesus not only answers the Pharisee's question about the greatest commandment (he gives two), but in doing so he summarizes all the moral and ethical guidance of the Scriptures. Quoting Deuteronomy and Leviticus, he boils it all down to this: love God with your whole being. Love your neighbor as yourself. (Easy to remember; hard to do.)

We often call this great double commandment the Summary of the Law. It's the essence of Christian moral and ethical guidance. It's a lens through which to read, to interpret, to appropriate for our own times the many rules and regulations of the ancient texts.

But notice something about the way Jesus summarizes the commandments: he uses the future tense (and it is in the future tense in the original Greek). He says, you shall. You will. You're going to. We do this in English too: *you will clean your room this afternoon, or you're not going out with your friends*. This has the weight and intention of a commandment of the parental sort—it's meant as imperative. But technically it's the future tense.

To love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and strength—this can seem beyond us some days (many days?). To love our neighbors as ourselves—this, too, can seem beyond us (especially in these fraught times).

But we shall. He said so. You shall love. You shall love God with your whole being. You will love your neighbor as yourself—in God's good time and eternity. It's not only a commandment, it's a promise. A prediction. A prophecy. We shall love—in God's good time and in the perfection, the completion of eternity.

And that, we could say, is a Christian response to the question, "*what is the meaning of it all?*" If all is not "vanity of vanities", what does it mean? It's the journey into the perfection of love. To grow in love. To grow toward that complete and perfect love for God and neighbor—the love that Christ has shown us. That is life's purpose and meaning.

You shall love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Even your enemies.)

The wise man of Ecclesiastes has goaded us into wrestling with his words. "*Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!*" It's all meaningless, he says. Our considered response: no, it's not. Thanks be to God.
