

“Do We Invest More in Abundance or in Emptiness?”

Friends, what a privilege and gift it is to pause for an extended moment of reflection on this last day in the month of July and the eighth Sunday in the long green, growing season of ordinary time in the circle of the church year. Those of us from People’s Congregational Church are grateful to our neighbors here at St. Peter’s United Church of Christ for welcoming us into your beloved sacred space. This morning (in person, via our live stream, and watching this recorded service later), we will wonder together about the balances we maintain between investing ourselves (meaning commitment of our time and energy) in experiences of abundance or fullness and investing ourselves in experiences of futile emptiness or vanity. I invite you to please pray with me now, closing your eyes if you wish.

God of Solomon, God of Jesus, God within each of us and connecting us in community; soften our spirits and open our minds this morning. We long for your Spirit to guide us into more nimbly hearing and responding to your call. Be with us as we explore our experiences of both abundant fullness and vain emptiness. As your Holy Spirit embraces us in this time and space, O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

In her poem, “Summer Day,” the late Pulitzer Prize winning poet Mary Oliver offered this challenge: *“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”* Today's scripture readings resonate with Oliver’s pointed question about intention. In the passage from Ecclesiastes, an aging King Solomon wonders if the work that he and all humans do during a lifetime are efforts of vanity – futility and emptiness. In the passage from Luke, Jesus challenges his audiences (then and now) to wonder: of what do our lives consist and in what do our lives abound?

Let's be with Solomon for a moment. As you listen to selected phrases from the reading, I invite you to wonder: What is one endeavor in my present-day life in which my investment of my time and energy feels vain, futile, empty in the sense of no return on the investment? I invite you to close your eyes now if you are comfortable doing so. Imagine that retiring King Solomon is speaking directly to you. We heard,

"All is vanity... I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind... What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity."

You may wish to open your eyes again. Where are you investing yourself in a "chase after wind?" In what endeavor are you diminishing your life force as you chronically reap vexation (that is displeasure, aggravation, exasperation)? Recalling words from Rev. Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer, could you change something about your investment in that wind-chasing, vexing endeavor? Will you do so courageously?

I considered titling this sermon more precisely, "Do We Invest More in Abundance or in Vanity." Honestly, I veered away from that option out of concern that it would read particularly judgmental in tone. There are ways of emptiness that are healing and empowering. For example, *kenosis* (self-emptying) is a vital spiritual practice among many Christian contemplatives. Today, I am specifically using the word emptiness to refer to our experiences of vanity - futile wind-chasing investments of ourselves that drain our life forces.

For a moment, let's be with Jesus, the one who demanded Jesus help him, and the listening crowd. This past week, I came across a helpful reminder of how respectfully and powerfully Jesus engaged with questions.

Kevin Nye, Assistant Director of Programs at The Center in Hollywood (a group that works on ending isolation and homelessness in Hollywood) tweeted this: *“In the gospels, Jesus is asked 187 questions. He answers (maybe) 8 of them. He himself asks 307. Maybe faith isn’t about certainty, but learning to ask—and sit in the complexity of—good questions.”*

As you listen to selected phrases from this reading, I invite you to wonder: What is it that is most abundant in my life? With what am I filling the time and space I occupy? Am I investing myself in experiences that both utilize and replenish my life force? I invite you to close your eyes now if you are comfortable doing so. Imagine that Jesus is speaking directly to you. We heard,

“Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?... Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions... And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.’”

You may wish to open your eyes again. When I wonder about how I invest myself and what I am storing up, I watch to notice whether or not the fruits of the Spirit are evident as a return on my investment. Which of these fruits do you long to store up – *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?”* (Galatians 5:22-23)

Let’s linger a moment longer on Jesus’ parable about the landowner, in which Jesus illustrated Solomon’s concern that humans will often vainly invest energy into feeding insatiable desire through relentless seeking. We heard, *“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”*

Notice that Jesus did not say that the enjoyment of material wealth is sinful in and of itself. Jesus expressed his longing that we might know that there are much more fruitful and fulfilling parts of our human lives.

So hear the parable again and listen for how the landowner was so caught up in his wind-chasing pursuit that he could not even reach outside himself for a conversation partner. *“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 the rich man 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 myself, ‘Look you, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to the rich man, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’”* Many say that this parable is the origin of the saying, ‘You can’t take it with you.’ What can we take with us? We can’t know for sure, but I hope something akin to the fruits of the spirit (*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*) will travel with us throughout the eternity that is beyond our imagining.

I would like to close by sharing a story of abundance – a moment of pausing and recognizing a deeply good kind of fullness. Ten years ago, I was a seminary intern in a congregation. One Sunday morning, I entered into the worship service in an anxious state of mind and spirit. As I settled into a pew and listened to the prelude, I was glad to be in a beloved space and surrounded by beloved people. But I was also deeply distracted. I was feeling fatigue, brought on by a busy lifestyle and an imbalance among work, play, and rest. I was feeling stressed and worried about many chasings of wind. I didn’t have enough of what I wanted. I wanted more... more time, more energy, more grace with myself, more ability to manage time... more, more, more... Until... I felt a tap on my shoulder. The freight train of my worrying was stopped in its tracks. Was it God? Yes, it was God in the form of young Adriana’s hand.

I wisely chose to be still and feel the hand of God through this young person navigating life with autism. As Adriana touched the collar of my robe, and then the back of my head, and finally patted me on the shoulder, my need for more melted away. "I am here with you," God was telling me. "I am here in the kindness of Adriana's touch, and our love is enough for you. It is all that you need in this moment." How Adriana knew to reach out to me that morning I will never fully understand. But I place my faith in the still-speaking God who spoke to me through her that morning. In that moment, I knew I had enough of anything worth having. I knew that God would continue to touch me with gentle reminders of my belovedness.

I wonder, in your lives, in what physical place do you often feel a gentle reminder of the kind of abundance that feels like enough, fullness, satiety? With whom do you often feel a gentle reminder of that kind of abundance that feels like enough, fullness, satiety?

In his book *Sabbath*, Wayne Muller writes, "*Gratefulness cultivates a visceral experience of having enough. When we are mindful of what we have and give thanks for the many gifts we have overlooked or forgotten, our sense of wealth cannot help but expand, and we soon achieve a sense of sufficiency we so desire.*" Friends, are we cultivating gratefulness as People's Congregational Church and as St. Peter's United Church of Christ? Across my early years in ministry, I have come to believe that the most supportive, life-sustaining way we can behave is by expressing mutual appreciation by really noticing one another and specifically naming the ways that another adds to our lives and to our common ministries.

May we move into the coming week with our senses open to receiving moments of true abundance through which reminders of our belovedness replenish our life force. And may we invest ourselves in co-creating moments of abundance in our homes, with our friends and as church. Love is counting on us. Amen!

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Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23; Luke 12:13-21