

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 4, 2019

*“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”
(Ecclesiastes 1:2-3)*

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes both begins and ends with the same general phrase: Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. At first glance, this phrase would appear rather depressing; yet it does maintain an understood statement of truth. Have you ever ridden through an older section of a town or city and seen urban blight? Buildings, once alive with various activities, are now overgrown decaying husks; silent reminders of the lives and dreams of earlier generations. What man has not revitalized; nature has reclaimed. I was only a young child, but you may remember, a 1970's "Keep America Beautiful" commercial of a Native American Indian crying as he surveyed the way we treated our environment. If earlier generations had only known the eventual outcome of these areas, could we not understand their heart break or depression? Fortunes and family businesses have also come and gone through generations. Both studies and life experiences have shown how a person or family would invest time and effort to amass one or both of these for future generations. Later generations might sell off or squander what was once achieved through hard work and determination. If parents were given the knowledge of how their children would either not appreciate or choose to spend their inheritance, could we then understand why some would become depressed? *“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity”* (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Yet, both the teachings of “the Preacher” of Ecclesiastes and Jesus also provide guidance in this “Epicurean” culture. [*Epicurus was an ancient Greek philosopher who is believed to have coined the phrase: “Eat, drink, be merry; for tomorrow you die.”]

Life is cyclical. Somewhere today a person will be born and a person will perish. A business will open for the first time and one will close for the last time. A new building will be constructed and another will be demolished. Life is cyclical, and that is why life is meaningful.

During our lives, we are given opportunities to inspire future generations to achieve a greatness we still hope for. More than a footprint upon the surface of Mars, a carbon neutral planet, or a hydrogen fuel cell automobile, our impact needs to center upon promoting the dignity of the human person. The wisdom of our age may place too great an emphasis upon the desire for personal pleasure. Through our striving to satisfy this desire we may commit a greater harm toward both ourselves and those we love. If a parent finds joy in giving gifts to their child, then could that parent potentially work longer hours to give greater more expensive gifts to the child while sacrificing time spent with the child? As we children have grown older, what do we remember more, the gifts or the time?

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes and Jesus stress self-sacrificial love. This approach may appear less glamorous and more humble, but its value lies in where it places value. Human life is valuable; therefore we should seek to uphold its dignity and elevate its quality through the impact our lives make. We could leave future generations monuments of brick and stone. We could leave our families chests filled with gold and silver. We could offer all of these, yet could these compare with one afternoon spent doing something together. To watch the sunset, read a book, cook, play catch, hold a damp cloth upon a sick child's forehead, are these not more impactful and meaningful than a roll of cash with a “see you later” attitude. If we want to leave future generations with a better world, let us begin by reminding them of how to live with both dignity and grace today.