

18th Sunday of the Ordinary Time

July 31, 2022

Most of us like control. Won't you agree? Many of us like to shape the world around us, steer things in the direction WE choose. How many of us try to change the topic of conversation if it's one we are not interested in? How many of us feel the need to choose the social lives of our family and friends - what movies we're going to see, where we're going to eat, where we're going to go on vacation, who's going to host a party, those sorts of things? How many of us want to be the spouse who sets the rules (and punishments) for our children? How many of us want to get our way at work, or on the road, or in conflicts that arise in retail stores, or during games, or in organizations we belong to?

Yes, many of us DO like to be in control. No doubt about that. We even often do it in relationships, especially romantic ones. How many of us go to great lengths to try to "change" others into the people we want them to be, often disregarding their own journeys, disregarding their need to be the people they feel they need to be (and maybe sincerely want to be)? The fact is, given the choice, most of us want to call the shots, want to be the one who decides how life will unfold.

And we probably act that way for a number of reasons. But the biggest reason might be a simple one - because we think we CAN. That's right. We probably often try controlling situations and people because we believe that (to a large extent) those things are absolutely in our control. And if we can just get our way, if we can shape and steer and manipulate things around us, we can protect ourselves from bad things, from the things we don't want, from people acting in ways we don't like. Put simply - our need to "control" might at its very core simply be a misguided need to try to ensure our "happiness".

I say "misguided" because deep down, we know things don't REALLY work that way. But we go ahead and try anyway, almost always to no avail. Disappointments find us. Sorrow finds us. Tragedy finds us. Failure finds us.

"Vanity of vanities . . . vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!"

So begins the Book of Ecclesiastes. For those of you who don't know - this book is not a "warm and fuzzy" one. Its message isn't "everything is going to be wonderful". It's much more realistic. It's much more in line with what we know

from personal experience. And that means it's kind of a tough read - yet absolutely necessary. The Hebrew word that is translated in this case as "vanity" is probably closer in meaning to our words "futile" or "empty" or "hollow" or "pointless". Where is the Good News in THAT? What is the human author driving at?

Let's jump ahead for a second to the Gospel reading from St. Luke, one in which Jesus tells a parable cautioning people against accumulating wealth - showing the fleeting nature of the material things of this world and the fleeting nature of our individual lives. It's as if Jesus is asking them, "What's the point? What's the point in pursuing all these things that, in the end, don't really matter?" I'm kind of surprised that Jesus didn't quote Ecclesiastes back to them and shout, "Vanity of vanities!" - for that seems to be exactly what he was trying to hammer home.

In a certain sense, the accumulation of material things can be an act of selfishness, a desire to simply have more than the next guy (or girl). But in another sense, it might also be an attempt to control, right? Don't we often accrue these things because we believe that they (in a certain sense) "protect" us from the bad things, "protect" us from being unhappy, "protect" us from the stuff the less fortunate are forced to endure?

"Vanity of vanities!"

Later in Ecclesiastes (in Chapter 3) we come to the most well-known passage in the whole book (and one of the most well-known in all of Scripture) - the section in which we read how in life there is "a time for every affair under the heavens". It's been my opening remarks in most of my funeral homilies since I joined you here in this Parish.

**"A time to give birth, and a time to die . . . A time to kill, and a time to heal . . .
A time to weep, and a time to laugh . . . A time to seek, and a time to lose . . .
A time to keep, and a time to cast away . . . (and so on)."**

And so, these readings are actually all telling us a similar thing. And they're not telling us that we CAN'T shape the world around us by our choices, or that we SHOULD'N'T try to make the world a better place, or that it's USELESS to try to bring about certain outcomes in certain situations. But what these passages DO

tell us is that we are absolutely not in control of everything, that much of WHAT we experience in life is really not up to us.

What is largely up to us is HOW we experience those things, HOW we respond to the difficulties that come our way, HOW we act when life doesn't go our way. That's the "control" God grants us willingly and completely - the inside stuff - the way we choose to think and see and act. Ironically (and sadly) those are the very things many of us have no interest in changing, no interest in exercising any sort of control over, no interest in modifying to make us better people - more loving and more forgiving.

But God wants us to embrace those very things, things of true value. And he wants us to stop trying to control all the other things that don't really matter much. And on top of that, he's willing to help us every step of the way.

Short Story

A wealthy American banker was standing on the pier of a coastal village in Mexico when a small boat with one fisherman aboard docked. In the boat were a few large tuna fish. The banker complimented the fisherman on the catch, then asked, 'how long were you out there?'

'Oh an hour or two', the fisherman replied.

'Why didn't you stay longer and catch more fish?'

'I've enough to keep the immediate needs of my family'.

'But what do you do with the rest of your time?'

'I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a siesta in the afternoon, stroll into the village in the evening to sip a little wine, play my guitar and chat with my friends. Believe me, I have a full life', said the fisherman.

The banker wasn't impressed. 'You should spend more time fishing,' he said.

'Then with the proceeds you could buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from that you could buy several boats. Eventually you'll have a fleet of fishing boats. Then you could open up your own processing factory and cannery. You will need to leave this village and move to Mexico City, then to Los Angeles, and eventually to the New York City, from where you would run your expanding business.'

'How long would all this take?' the fisherman asked.

'About twenty years,' the banker replied.

'And what then?' asked the fisherman.

'When the time is right you could float your company on the stock market, sell your stock to the public and make millions.'

'Then what?' asked the fisherman.

'Then you could retire and move to a coastal village, where you could sleep late, fish a little, play with your children, take a siesta in the afternoon, stroll in the village in the evening and have fun with your friends'.

'What do you think I'm doing now?' asked the fisherman.