

Proper 13 Year C  
July 31, 2022  
Bill Ball

## DOING AND NOTHINGNESS

*Psalm 49: 1-11*  
*Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23*  
*Colossians 3:1-11*  
*Luke 10:25-37*

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts and minds, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

**Amen.**

***Please be seated.***

Pray for me, brothers and sisters.

As this service of Morning Prayer is meant to be a contemplative service, [*and in this more intimate - and cooler - setting of the Chapel rather than the cavernous wonder of the main Sanctuary*] let us begin by breathing three mindful and contemplative breaths, IN and OUT.

IN the name of the Father, OUT &  
IN the name of the Son, OUT &  
IN the name of the Holy Spirit. OUT  
Amen.

I've got some mildly bad news to share.

The first time that I spoke to you formally from the Holy Trinity pulpit was about three months ago. In that talk, I took as my starting point an emotional response to that week's readings, especially the gospel of John, chapter 21, a response that centered on ***weeping and regret.***

As a fair warning, the emotional key for this week is ***despair.*** So that's the first piece of mildly bad news.

The second piece of mildly bad news is that it turns out that I only have one sermon, and I preached it the last time I spoke to you from the pulpit, which was my first time speaking to you from the pulpit, and maybe the last time that I will speak to anyone from a pulpit. So I don't really have a new sermon to offer for today.

Instead of a sermon, I am going to offer some friendly advice that I have found helpful to me. Maybe you will find it helpful too.

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As a Methodist by upbringing and temperament, I look for ways to improve my spiritual life and my life in general. On January 11, 2021, online somewhere I stumbled upon a five-step program for getting started better in the morning.

1. The night before, decide what you are going to focus on first in the morning, and write it down. (I usually write it on a 4x6 index card that I keep near my workspace. Yesterday morning the notecard said, "Write sermon.")
2. Wake up without an alarm clock. (Which I did at 2 AM this morning, because I still had not written the sermon that I had meant to write yesterday.)
3. Start moving (with a walk, or yoga, or calisthenics, or sometimes my favorite *just sitting*).
4. Drink water first, before other stimulants. (Nope, I started by drinking coffee at 2 AM.)
5. Ponder *The Question*.

Here is The Question to ask yourself first thing in the morning every day.

"Self, If today were to turn out to be your last day,

**Are you doing what you would want to be doing on your last day?"**

And this morning I said to myself, in answer to this question "Self, I AM doing what I would want to be doing on my last day. Because on my last day I would be pleased to be trying to write a sermon to share with my friends and family at the Church of the Holy Trinity."

Hmmm,

**Are you doing what you would want to be doing on your last day?**

Wait a minute. That question rings a bell. Maybe there is a sermon here.

Right right right, that question, The Question, reminds me of the gospel lesson for today. So let's look at that for a minute or two, and I'll get to the rest of my friendly advice later.

The context for Jesus telling the **parable of the barns** is a request from "someone in the crowd." The request is very odd, even by gospel standards. It is not a request for healing, or for exorcism, or for raising from the dead, or for salvation from a storm, or for the feeding of 4000 or 5000 people. And it is just a request from "someone in the crowd," that is, it is not a question from someone identified as a scribe or a Levite or a Pharisee or a Sadducee – who seem all the time to be trying to set a legalistic or theological trap for this upstart teacher from the Galilean backwoods. It is just from "someone."

No, it's not a trick question, and it seems to me to be a sincere request - "Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." A sincere request, but a bit awkward, admittedly, to which

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Jesus offers a typical deflection, or perhaps it is even a mild rebuke: “Friend [Listen, buddy?], who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”

And then Jesus tells “them” (the crowd I suppose) the **Parable of the Barns**.

A rich man has barns (note the plural: he’s very rich) for storing grain and goods.

And this rich man has had an unusually prosperous year and needs more storage for his crops and goods.

So he decides to build more barns to store all those goods so that he can live at ease for the rest of his life (or at least many years), and he says to his Soul, “Soul, relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

But God says “This very night your life is demanded of you.”

Okay, cool, like “isn’t it ironic, don’t you think?” Maybe a little too ironic, I really do think.

But how is this relevant to me? I do happen to live in the historic South Farms area of Middletown, and my neighbors do keep chickens, but I don’t have a barn, and I do not grow or gather crops, – and I doubt that many of you do either. So, really, this parable is not relevant to me, or to you, my enlightened and wise friends.

**Or is it? Think about it.**

Well, if I am a bit more honest with myself and open with you, no, while it is true that I do not have any barns or crops, I do have a healthy bank account, and I do have an IRA, and I do expect to receive social security payments at some point in the near future. And in fact, at least until recently, I have maintained what I called *my forty-year plan* as part of my budget. And this 40-year plan accounted for all the costs that I knew about for maintaining a subsistence lifestyle. Yes, that’s right, *a forty-year plan*. And I am already age 65, so barring radical improvements in life expectancy, I might indeed say to my Soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

See, basically, I am that guy in the parable.

Maybe some of you are too.

**Think about it.**

*[Leave some space for response.]*

Now, of course, it’s not just about barns and crops and personal finances, not entirely, but it is also about all the things that we treasure (on earth) - possessions, of course, the things of

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consumer commerce, but also enriching activities and endeavors and achievements, maybe even some stuff that we think of as critical to our personal identity.

*What are your barns? What is your specific favorite crop?*

And what does it mean for you to have a prosperous year, in that endeavor? When was the last time you had a truly prosperous year with that favorite crop of yours?

And what do you do when you have a prosperous year, in those terms? What is your moral equivalent of tearing down the old barns and putting up new barns?

**Think about it.**

*[Leave some space for response.]*

*And the things you have prepared*

[stored in barns, or mounted on walls, or speeches spoken to the assembly, meals that you have served to the poor, the music you have played, the dances that you have choreographed or performed, the papers you have presented, the grants that you have obtained, the libraries you have built, the museums you have established, the churches that you have planted, the stained glass windows that you have commissioned.....]

*...these things you have prepared*

*Whose will they be?*

*So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves...*

*For one's LIFE does not consist in the abundance of possessions [or achievements, or accolades, or donations, or service...]*

*But in richness to God.*

**[PAUSE]**

Okay, maybe there is a sermon there. But maybe we need to think more about this "richness to God" thing. But first, **more bad news.**

It's really just bad news for me. The bad news for me in all of this is that I really wanted to be able to preach on *Ecclesiastes*. You see, I discovered that this Sunday, Proper 13 in Year C of the liturgical year, is the only Sunday out of the three-year cycle of the lectionary where it is an option to preach on *Ecclesiastes*. So it's probably now or never, for me.

The name of the book, *Ecclesiastes*, is the English transliteration of the Greek word that is the closest equivalent to the Hebrew *Qo-HEL-eth*. In Hebrew *Qohelel*, or in Greek *Ekklesia* is a

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gathering, and ecclesiastes is a past participle form that may mean “one who gathers or calls together,” hence the translation *Teacher* or in some translations *Preacher*.

What the preacher says is “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!”

What is this vanity of which the Preacher speaks?

Our 21st-century American concept of vanity is something like “preening self-regard” or conceit about appearances - and for many it is embraced as a cardinal virtue – I think of the popular magazine of self-conceit “Vanity Fair,” which seems to be reincarnated every generation or so.

In Aristotle’s Ethics of Moderation vanity is an excess in the sphere of Honour and Dishonor. In Roman Catholicism, I understand that vanity is one of the so-called seven deadly sins. So even this narrow sense of vanity, conceit about appearances, can be, well, difficult.

But the concept of vanity in the 1600’s, when the King James Version of the Bible in English (1611) was produced, seems to me to have been broader, very wide indeed. The original Vanity Fair is the invention of John Bunyan in his book *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), described thus:

Therefore, at this fair are all such merchandise sold as houses, lands, trades, places, honors, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures; and delights of all sorts, as harlots, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not.

That is to say, (back to the parable) – barns, barns, and more barns, full to the brim with goods and bads and a whole lot more of what not.

In addition, just for the record, the Hebrew word *hevel*, translated into English as “vanity,” literally means “vapor,” or figuratively could mean “insubstantial,” “futile,” or “meaningless.”<sup>1</sup> Or even, “nothingness.”

Now here is something cool. In the parts of chapter 2 that were passed over in today’s reading from Ecclesiastes, the Preacher, “the son of David, king in Jerusalem”(1:1), says to himself “(Self? Soul?) Come now, I will make a test of pleasure” In this test of pleasure, he tries laughter (merriment) and cheering his body with wine. But also he “made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens, and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.” And he buys slaves and gathers great possessions and silver and gold, and singers, both men and women, and concubines.

The experiment or test of pleasure is a rousing success:

So I became great and surpassed all that were before me in Jerusalem,...for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. (2:9-10)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesiastes>

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But alas:

Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil that I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing new under the sun. (2:11)

Hence the lament of the Preacher: "I hated all my toil...[for] I must leave it to those who come after me...so I turned and gave my heart to *despair* concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun." (2:18-19)

That is, work, even good work, is vanity, meaningless. And then you die. Or rather, it is meaningless *because* then you die. This is a source of despair. *More bad news.*

The difficulty, here and now – **Where is the Good News in all of this?**

I really don't know if I've got any good news for you today, just another bit of advice, in the form of an aphorism.

A brave but foolish man once held it as a rule of life:

*Always do all that you can do.*

A wiser and more prudent man offered this advice:

*Only do what only you can do.*

At this time, today, here and now, I am able to stand before you, and look out at your faces, and speak to you, and listen with my ears, and see with my eyes. And it is a great blessing to me. And only I can preach this sermon that is not a sermon, to you, today. So I am totally doing what I would want to be doing if today were to be my last day – I am doing what only I can do.

There may come a day, sooner than I would wish, when I can no longer stand before you, or even stand at all. A day, sooner than I would wish, when I cannot see, because I am blind. A day when I cannot hear, because I am deaf.

And yet, while I have breath, there is more right with me than wrong, more wellness than illness.

*Remember also your Creator* in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain; in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look through the window are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut; when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; they are afraid also what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because man goes to his eternal home,

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and the mourners go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

(12: 1-8)

And for so long as God's still small voice calls me to remembrance, while I still have breath, even if it is all that I can do, then it is ALL that I can do, ALL that I need to do, to respond to that still small voice. To breathe and *remember also My Creator*.

And it is ALL that ONLY I can do, to respond to that still small voice, and to give my heart to Jesus, for safe-keeping. Because ONLY I can give MY heart to Jesus.

And it is ALL that ONLY you can do, and ALL that you need to do. Only you can do it. Do it now; do it again, do it with every breath – Give your heart to Jesus, for safe-keeping.

[PAUSE]

And that is enough. And all is well, all is well, and all manner of thing shall be well.

And so we breathe, IN and OUT.

IN...the name of the Father

IN...the name of the Son,

IN...the name of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.