

Ecclesiastes 4:4-6; Luke 12:13-21 [NIV]

And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ⁵ Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. ⁶ Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

¹³ *Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me."*

¹⁴ *Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" ¹⁵ Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."*

¹⁶ *And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'*

¹⁸ *"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."'*

²⁰ *"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'*

²¹ *"This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."*

We are in Luke's gospel today – the passage that was just read for us, so you're welcome to turn there if you like, and we'll get there in a minute.

For you who are new within the past year, what I'm doing today is something I do every year. It's supposed to be something like what most of us had to do when we were in elementary or middle school – at least I remember doing it every fall, writing a report about what I did and what I learned over summer vacation.

My reports tended to be pretty short – since school and I never got along all that well. The truth is, I tried very hard to *not* learn anything over the summer.

And right now, some of you are hoping that's still the case, because it would make the sermon shorter.

As many of you know, since my wife is from Oregon and her family is all in Oregon, we usually go to the Oregon coast for a couple of weeks in the summer. For several reasons this year, though, we could not do that. So, we had a two-part vacation plan.

The first part we planned was to go to a cabin in Western New York in the middle of last month. But just two days before we were to leave, the well at that cabin unexpectedly went dry, so since there was no water, we could not go there.

I'm thinking that there just has to be a sermon in that whole "well running dry just before the preacher arrives" thing. Maybe we should have taken some wine with us and asked Jesus to turn it into water, I don't know.

Anyway, we had to, in two days, figure out new vacation plans. We did keep the first part of that trip in place, which was to stop to see my mom in northeast Ohio for a few days. But then, instead of going to New

York, we headed east to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. We stayed in a hotel in Lancaster, spent a day in Hershey and another day in Philadelphia – saw the sights in those places – and then spent the rest of the time in what I grew up calling "Dutch Country," checking out the Amish flea markets, smorgasbords, pretzel factories, smorgasbards, the train museum in Strasburg, the beautiful farmland, the smorgasbords – those sorts of things.

That was back in the middle of July.

Then, last weekend was the second part of this summer's vacation. We drove about thirteen hours to Minneapolis so that David, our son, could participate with his team (which included Isaac Madill, Chase Padgett, and Nathan and Nick Riffell) in their age division of the YCC Ultimate Frisbee National Championships, which they rather easily won, by the way – undoubtedly due to the tremendous genetic material passed to them by their parents.

And that was our very fun, two-part, summer vacation.

So, what did I learn?

A number of things.

For one, I learned that, to the kids, the quality of any vacation that involves staying in a hotel is directly linked to the quality of the complimentary breakfast the hotel provides. Our hotel in Dutch Country was still in COVID mode about that, unfortunately, even though there were buffets, some even without sneeze guards, wide open all around us.

Second, after hearing about them for years on Hogan's Heroes, I finally learned what spatzle, potato pancakes, sauerbraten and wiener schnitzel taste like. On our way home, in the Germantown neighborhood on the south side of Columbus, we ate dinner at Schmidt's Sausage House. Write that down – it's worth the trip.

I learned that, in order to eat like the Amish eat and not gain a lot of weight, you have to physically work like the Amish work.

I learned that it's a miserably smelly thing to walk through downtown Philadelphia on a hot, July afternoon – on garbage day. But even still, the pizza from Angelos was fabulous and worth the walk.

I learned, or rather was reminded, that a 13-hour drive is about 3 hours longer than what is reasonable for one day.

I learned – and if you look closely you can still witness this fact – that a person can, indeed, get quite a sunburn if you stand and face east between 8 and 11 in the morning on a sunny day.

I learned that I really like the restaurant Chipotle – I ate there for the first time in Minnesota – although I do think it's a little expensive.

I – maybe not so much *learned*, but rather – *observed* that our two trips did not just take us in opposite

geographical directions, but also in opposite *political/philosophical/sociological* directions.

The people who live in and around Pennsylvania Dutch country – and for the most part, the people who visit there – are conservative, and they are conservative by the very definition of the word. I mean, if you're still using horses to plow your land, you're conservative – you like things the way they are and you are resistant to change.

On the flip side, you may or may not know that, at the national level, the Ultimate Frisbee crowd is, overall, very liberal, and especially sexually: which they tend to make known – lots of transgender stuff, flying the pride flags and all that.

Of all the teams we asked to join us in singing the national anthem before the games, only one did so, and so our team represented points of view that were in the minority at the tournament, and probably in Minneapolis in general.

So that was interesting.

And then finally, maybe in part because of that, and certainly because of COVID, this was a very interesting year to watch people.

What used to be common, conventional human interactive behavior is, in many cases, out the window, and what has replaced it, in many cases, is just sheer confusion. People don't have a feel anymore about what's acceptable – what others are thinking – how others will respond to what you do. You just don't know how people are going to react, and so, often you wind up being a little skittish in how you engage other people.

Some walked right up, shook my hand, and started talking. Others nearly jumped away from me when they felt I was moving too close to them – like when I was trying to steal that one guy's wallet.

No, seriously, I was getting coffee one morning at the hotel – I was at least four or five feet away from him, but I was obviously too close for his comfort.

So, more and more, it's hard to know with people these days where friendliness stops and offense starts.

And when you take all of that together, what I find is – maybe you don't do this, but I do – I tend to wind up making snap judgments about people and why they do what they do.

Why did that guy jump away from me at the coffee station there? I immediately think, "He must be just full of fear."

Why do the Amish use horses and not modern machinery? I immediately think, "Because they're uninformed and backward."

Why do those girls want to look like boys and those boys want to look like girls? I immediately think, "Because they just want to be trendy and cool."

Why does that guy on the other team act so obnoxiously? I immediately think, "Because he's an arrogant jerk."

As I said, maybe you don't, but I admit that I tend to default to snap judgments about people I encounter who are different than me – because it's easy, and honestly

because I tend to think I'm right and my perspective is right.

And I don't think I'm the only one who does this.

And yet, what I have to remember is that there is almost always far *more* to the story – *more* to the situation, *more* to that person in front of me – than is easily seen.

And part of being a follower of Jesus – part of loving that person – has to involve remembering that and, instead of defaulting to snap judgements, finding out what, exactly, that "more" is.

That's part of what the Apostle Paul meant when he said Christ-followers are to make all our thoughts obedient to Jesus.¹

And we see a great example of this at the beginning of our Luke text there.

A fellow comes to Jesus and asks him to intervene in a family legal matter. "*Teacher,*" he says, "*tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.*"

Now, it was not an uncommon occurrence to ask a rabbi to mediate a dispute.

And it seems to be a dispute about justice at that!

"*My brother is being unjust to me!*" That's the message that's communicated here, with, I'm sure, this guy's full expectation of Jesus' engagement – because surely, the guy thought, "Who doesn't want to be a part of bringing justice to bear? Especially a religious leader – they have to help bring justice!"

"If you can get religious people engaged at the justice level, you can get a lot accomplished," that's what this guy thought.

That's what people still think today. Christians hear someone claim "injustice," and we flock to that call with intentions of jumping in and making it right, because those poor people have obviously been mistreated.

It's the Christian thing to do to jump to action – that's what we think.

Ah, but wait. Jesus does not do that here, does He? Jesus does not jump at this guy's call.

Why? Because Jesus was able to see that there was more to this story – more to this situation, more to this fellow and his claim – than just what was apparent on the surface.

Jesus realized that not every call for justice is really about justice.

Contrary, I'm sure, to what this fellow expected – and probably to what everyone else standing there expected, Jesus does not launch into some declaration about justice. Instead, Jesus launches into a declaration about *greed* – this guy's greed – and the eternal destruction that preoccupation with greed brings.

Jesus does, certainly, help the fellow, but not in the way the fellow expected, because Jesus was able to understand and address the deeper issue in his life.

And this is the work of the Christ-follower:

- not to simply go with what's popular,
- not to presume what we see on the surface is the whole story,
- not to jump to the easiest conclusions to reach,

¹ 2 Corinthians 10:5

but instead to take the time to carefully, prayerfully, consider and ask ourselves the questions:

“OK – what’s really going on behind the scenes here?”

“Why is this person doing what they’re doing?”

“What’s happened in his or her life that has brought them to this place – that makes them act or react this way?”

“Is there a deeper, spiritual issue here that is causing this behavior?”

You see, if we’re just reacting to that which is on the surface, chances are we’ll only ever deal with symptoms.

Jesus didn’t waste time doing that. He dealt with causes – at the motive level, which actually made Him both far more critical of some people, like with this guy here, and also, many other times, it made Him far more compassionate with people.

What has happened in this guy’s life that makes him so jumpy about being close to me at the coffee station? He’s not just senselessly fearful. His younger brother, who had all the same medical conditions he has, died of COVID a couple months ago. Ah, I didn’t know that.

Why do the Amish live like they do? It’s not because they’re uninformed and backward. It’s because they have a whole set of convictions about not being dependent on the English world.

Why does that girl want to be a boy? It’s not just because transgender is trendy. It’s because she never had a positive, affirming male figure in her life, or maybe she’s only known abuse by her mom’s string of boyfriends, or maybe something else.

Why is that guy on the other team so obnoxious? It’s because he’s been put down by his parents and his family his whole life, and so in order to keep himself above water, he has to push down on other people.

I’m not saying any of those explanations make any of those issues intrinsically right or wrong – not at all.

What I’m saying is that in order to engage people as Christ, we have to remember there’s always more to the story than what we see on the surface. There’s always more to the person than what they typically make apparent.

Rejecting snap judgments and taking the time to go deeper with people – that’s part of loving them with the love of Christ. The truth is, it’s way more work and takes more time and requires more patience and calls for more humility on our part, but that’s what followers of Jesus are called to do.

And the greatest thing is, the very same Spirit of God who lived in Jesus lives in all who follow Jesus. The Holy Spirit will help us see things, realize things, ask the right

questions, and feel far more compassion than would ever be possible in mere human strength.

If we will open ourselves to Him and invite Him to do so, He will temper our responses and guide our thinking, so we can see what He sees, and so that truth and love can work together in our lives and relationships.

The fact of it is, we cannot engage our world with appropriate truth and love apart from the guidance of the Spirit. We can’t do it on our own.

We can’t see people and situations as Jesus sees them – we can’t see beneath the surface – apart from the guidance of the Spirit.

If Christ-followers are to be salt and light in this world, especially in our so very polarized nation, we really have to get serious about listening to God’s Spirit in our interactions with others: both believers and unbelievers.

We need Him to inform us and temper us and deepen us, in order to bring both truth and love, as Jesus did, to those around us.

Are you willing to give up snap judgments and sound-bite answers and assessments, and instead, let God’s Spirit help you really, deeply engage with people?

He’s ready and willing and able to help us.

He’s the tool the Church needs to engage our world, and He’s just waiting for our invitation.

Closing Prayer:

Holy Spirit of God, we do invite you to take your place – your role in our lives as Helper, Counselor, Guide. To be Christ’s presence and witness in this broken world, we need You. We need Your help to see past the surface and beneath what’s apparent, so we can be patient and kind – and so we can be speakers of truth and love. Help us be real peacemakers, not just between persons, but between people and You.

Holy Spirit, come into every open, willing heart here and now, we ask, for the sake of our witness, for the sake of truth, for the sake of love, for the sake of Jesus made known in these days.

Closing Song: *Breathe on Me, Breath of God*, vv. 1-3

Benediction:

May we all go from this place:

More sensitive to God’s Spirit’s voice and leading,
More willing to see beneath the surface,
More able to engage our world with real truth and real love.

May we go from this place more like Jesus.