

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

August 3, 2025

There's Nothing Up There

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What do you aspire to? What goals do you have? To retire comfortably? Own a larger house? A newer car? Perhaps your goals involve attaining a certain status or level of influence. What are you chasing after? And...now this is the really important piece...is it worth it? Are you chasing after something real or illusory?

“All is vanity” says the author of Ecclesiastes before he goes on to lament the pointlessness of it all. A somewhat ironic statement given the little we know about Qoheleth, the author. He writes like someone with an education and his references reinforce that belief. This strongly suggests that Qoheleth was once a member of the elites and likely had some proximity to power.

But rather than toe the elite-class-line, which would have gone something like: “God blessed me with wealth and land, and not you, therefore you get to work for my profit.” Instead the author laments toiling under the sun. He laments that the work of his hands will prosper someone else, someone who did not labor and did not plan.

The author of Ecclesiastes could be complaining about the foolish landowner in Jesus' parable. Imagine working for this jerk! First off he's a pretty poor planner. It's generally not wise to plant so much more than you can store that you have to build larger barns. Then there's his attitude towards the harvest: me, me, me, I, I, I. No mention of the laborers or family that lead to this

bumper harvest. No mention of good weather or the other blessings from God that made it possible. Nope, this landowner is entirely self-centered, and his aspiration is to relax and enjoy his life, ignoring how he got to where he is.

Now, his aspiration doesn't pan out. God demands this landowner's life from him that "very night." And as Qoheleth complains, all that he has stored up will go to someone else...much like all that he had acquired himself he got at the expense of others...laborers, family, the land itself.

Jesus is warning this young man against greed. Do not pursue wealth, power, and influence, because at the end of the day, it's all temporary...illusory. There's nothing atop the social/economic ladder except more wanting, more comparison, more exploitation. There's nothing real up there.

God knows this, Jesus knows this, and yet we struggle so mightily to understand this ourselves. Our time on this planet is not meant to be spent taking advantage of others. It's not meant to be spent toiling away for others' benefit either. We are on this planet to be agents of God's grace and love, as well as stewards of God's bounteous creation. We are on this planet to work...work for the betterment of all. We are on this planet for community and connection.

From a study published last year in "World Development Perspectives": "Nearly one-fifth of the world population lives in extreme poverty, unable to access basic goods such as food and shelter.... Large gaps in life expectancy and other key social indicators persist between the core and periphery of the world economy."¹ This same study goes on to prove that "Provisioning decent living standards (DLS) for 8.5 billion people would require **only 30% of current global resource and energy use**, leaving a substantial surplus for

¹ Jason Hickel, Dylan Sullivan, "How much growth is required to achieve good lives for all? Insights from needs-based analysis," World Development Perspectives, vol. 35, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wdp.2024.100612>.

additional consumption, public luxury, scientific advancement, and other social investments.”²

A world in which poverty is eradicated is within our reach. A world in which hunger is no more is within our reach. A world in which everyone’s basic needs are met is within our reach. And the consistent message of the Gospel is that such a world **should be!** Jesus warns repeatedly against greed, because it does such harm to people and creation. Yet we live in a world that holds greed as the most important value there is. A world designed, intentionally, to keep a privileged few at the top, while the vast majority of humanity doesn’t have all that they need.

A quick reminder, Jesus spoke more on the topic of wealth and poverty than he spoke on prayer! Greed is a cancer at the heart of any society, let alone one that celebrates it! Jesus saw to the heart of this young man’s question about inheritance. He saw that his heart was fixed on greed...on moving up. So he warns him...see this greedy landowner who wants to move up...see how well that goes for him! It’s all vanity!

So I ask again: what do you aspire to? And is there a **there** there? The pursuit of wealth, status, and comfort, too often leads to emptiness, exploitation, and disconnection. These aspirations, when rooted in self-interest, can blind us to the needs of others and the call to walk the Way. Instead of chasing illusions, we are called to chase after righteousness, compassion, and community. The Gospel doesn’t condemn ambition itself, but it does challenge us to aim for goals that reflect God’s heart—a heart that longs for justice, mercy, and love to reign.

What are you chasing after? If your goals do not contribute to the flourishing of others, if they do not reflect the values of the Kingdom of God, then perhaps it’s time to re-evaluate. The world Jesus envisions is one where no

² *Ibid.*

one is left behind, where abundance is shared, and where love is the currency of life. That world is not only possible, it is promised. But it begins with us, choosing to live differently, choosing to aspire to something greater than vanity. It begins with us choosing to be agents of grace in a world that desperately needs it. Amen.