

Proper 13 C  
Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23  
July 31, 2022

*“What We Leave Behind”*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

*I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.*

*I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me —and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.*

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Film director Woody Allen once said that “life is divided into the horrible and the miserable.” It seems that the author of today’s text would wholeheartedly agree. I should, however, classify that statement slightly: the

author of today's text is writing the words of another whom they simply call Qoheleth—the Teacher. Tradition has held that these are the teachings of Solomon the Wise, son of King David and Bathsheba, who reigned for 41 years beginning in 930 B.C.E. Today, most scholars place the composition of Ecclesiastes after 450 B.C.E. during the period of Israel's exile. Regardless of who the teacher actually was, there's little dispute that this morning's text takes on an unusually gloomy tone.

“Vanity of vanities . . . All is vanity and a chasing after the wind,” the teacher states. Here, the word vanity means vaporous, impermanent, pointless. The teacher bemoans the fact that all their hard work will pass into another's hands upon their death, to be enjoyed by ones that did not work for it. The teacher calls this “a great evil.” What is the reward for all the work of mortals? “Nothing,” the teacher says, “but pain and frustration and sleepless nights. Vanity.”

Far be it from me to challenge the mighty Qoheleth, the learned teacher, even the great Solomon, or whoever penned these words, for I am but a lowly minister. But, doesn't this perspective seem a little short-sighted? How many among us, I wonder, have spent their lives working to leave something for their children and grandchildren when they're gone? How many among us have sweat and bled to provide endowed funds for this church or an arts program or a scholarship fund or a nonprofit—monies that will continue to work, long after we're gone? And, who could look at the state of unrest in our world, of democracy in America, and of rising debt and global temperatures and sea-levels and not wonder what kind of world we are really leaving the next generation? Is this vanity—vaporous, impermanent, pointless? I hardly think so. This is about the thriving of our offspring, the future of our species, the prospects of our planet. This is not vanity. This is reality. And it's a reality that each and every one of us must face. What will we leave behind?

Some of you will no doubt remember the film *Dead Poets Society* starring Robin Williams as English professor John Keating. Set in a 1959

boarding school, Keating challenges his students to think about the meaning of life by quoting from Walt Whitman's poem, *Oh Me! Oh Life!*

Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,  
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish  
. . . What good amid these, O me, O life?  
*Answer:* That you are here—that life exists and identity,  
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.<sup>1</sup>

Whitman describes life as a play, in which all people contribute a verse. Keating asks his students, "What will your verse be?" The same question can be asked of us today: What will our verse, our legacy be?

The truth is, far from being vain, vaporous, impermanent, and pointless as Qoheleth, the teacher from Ecclesiastes, would have us believe, how we leave this nation, the environment, and the world is our verse, our legacy, our very immortality. There is nothing more permanent than that.

While the teacher grieves that their life's work will pass into the unworthy hands of their successors, 19<sup>th</sup> century American psychologist and philosopher William James reminds us that, "the greatest use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it." Author Chuck Palahniuk says it this way: "We all die. The goal isn't to live forever, the goal is to create something that will."

The concept of leaving a legacy doesn't begin and end with the individual. It applies to our institutions, even this congregation. In its proud 160+ years of history, New England church has created a legacy of abolition, women's rights, music and the arts, a thinking church for caring people, a place where all are welcome. What next, I wonder? To help us think about this, we're going to begin a process of intentional self-reflection and visioning this fall. Considering our future—the future of this church—we're thinking about future generations and the ways our efforts will

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<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass*, 1892.

continue to positively impact our community and our world for years to come. As one much wiser than I has said, “The greatest use of a life is to spend it for something that will outlast it.”

And so, to the teacher, to Qoheleth, I must say that I respectfully disagree. All is not vanity. Our efforts are not vaporous, impermanent, or pointless. They are an investment in those who come after us and if we do our work well, we will be proud to pass the baton on to future generations. We must not let them down. May it be so. Amen.