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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA  
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost  
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All of That Vanity—Hebel*

Good morning. Good morning!

Today's readings all have something to do with our work, our worth, our way of thinking about our lives. Many of you, maybe even most of you here this Sunday are now retired after a lifetime of work. We Americans, when we meet someone new, often ask, "Oh, so what do you do?" In the case of my parents, who retired a few years ago, they would reply, "We are full time grandparents!" They watch my one-year-old niece several times a week. They drive my other niece and nephews to and from extracurricular activities. They make food and visit neighbors and friends who are just coming home from the hospital or who have been sick. In my mother's words, "I retired and now I am busier than ever!"

Some of you are busier than ever as well. With all of that spare time you are serving your families, your neighbors, your church, your friends, and communities. In fact, you might find yourself saying, "I just don't seem to have any time" or "The time just seems to get away from me." With all this busyness, it might be easy for us to put our worth in what we are getting done, even if it is volunteer work. In our daily lives, we might grieve the things we used to do so easily that have become harder or even impossible for us to do. Let me say these things again. Many of us find our self-worth in our work, in what we are able to do. And just as many of us grieve what we are not able to do or are no longer able to accomplish and feel less-than because of it.

Our reading from Ecclesiastes talks about all of our hard work, all of our deeds done under the sun—and here I want you to think of the sun-up to sundown kind of field or farm work you might have done growing up. Think of the days people spend moving from one house to another hauling boxes and furniture for hours on end. Think about the enormous task of getting the garden ready for spring planting. Think

about splitting logs and chopping cords of wood, hauling it and stacking it for the coming winter. That kind of toil.

Now, think about all of your accomplishments and achievements over the course of your life in a chosen career. For some, that might be a career in the military with several tours overseas. For others, it might be a lifetime of wise or lucky financial decisions, investments or saving that allows for a comfortable and secure second half of life. For some it might be recognition from your company or your peers for personal excellence in your field. For many of you, it is running a household, and raising your children the very best you could. This is what Ecclesiastes is talking about today. Real work. A lifetime of work. All the hours counted and uncounted, all the money and effort and struggle we have endured and saved up for ourselves and others.

This is what Ecclesiastes is calling vanity. The work of our hands and our hearts. Vanity. Our years of joy and worry, what scripture is calling chasing after the wind. In the Hebrew, the word is *Hebel*—which means vapor or breath. We also translate Hebel as an ephemeral little bit of breath, or as delusion, as fleeting, as emptiness. As Psalm 78:39 reminds us, "He remembered that they were but flesh, a passing breeze that does not return." Vanity.

This is the point where you might be saying, "Well, that's depressing Intern Pastor Jory. You are a complete downer this morning. I don't come to church for this kind of thing. I am here to get a good feeling that will carry me through the week thank you." Ecclesiastes says, even if I am not here to remind you, that when we think about our accomplishments, or worry about them, or think of what might or might not happen once we are gone. When we do this we can give our hearts up do despair. Vanity. Hebel. Our minds do not rest. It's not just vanity, but also a great evil to us.

If this is the good news for this Sunday, I think I will just leave. Thanks, but no thanks. We are human. We have questions about our legacies. We want to know all of our hard work meant something. We want to know that our lives have meaning. We wouldn't be human if we didn't. This is part of what makes us human, that desire for meaning. That longing for more than what we can see or know in the moment. It's not a sin. It's how we were built. It is God given.

Some of us want our pastor or our church to give us a simple answer to these questions. We want a few Bible verses to calm the chaos within us, to still those stormy waters that we feel late at night. "Pastor Jana, just tell me what I need to do!" Well, what do we do!?

We sound exactly like the man in Luke's gospel today. "Jesus, tell my brother to get in line." "God, help my child to quit making bad decisions." "Pastor, just tell my husband to get his head on straight." What we are saying is, "God/pastor/church SOMEONE, just tell me that it all really matters somehow. That it will all work out. That I will be okay." Will I be okay? What does Jesus say to the man who wants Jesus to play executor to the family will? "Friend, it isn't my job to boss you around." "Friend, watch out for your tendency to be greedy." "Dear one, don't let your fear of financial insecurity ruin your relationship with your family who are alive." "We only have a little while," Jesus says. Our lives are like the dew upon the grass in the morning, and then the sun burns it away. Hebel.

We do our best job raising our families, saving for a secure retirement, doing good in our communities, but there are no guarantees about the future. About how long the good will last. That this too, shall pass. We become like the person who did so well, they decide they need a bigger barn for all that grain. But we aren't around long enough to attend the barn raising party. Hebel.

Now, if I were a different kind of minister, a different kind of preacher, this is where I would tell you, YOU BETTER GET RIGHT WITH GOD! REPENT! Because Jesus is coming like a thief in the night, and he is coming to your house SOON! Hebel. Maybe you grew up in churches like this. Maybe you know this kind of message and the fear and anxiety it stirs up in you, to motivate you to some action. If I were a different kind of preacher, I would say, "Friends you need to get right with God and get right NOW, because you may be dead tomorrow and then what?!...Sister, please pass the offertory basket." But I am not, so I won't use fear and anxiety about tomorrow to get money out of your pockets.

Instead, I would have us look at the final passage we read today from Colossians. "So, if you have been raised with Christ, seek things that are above." As Lutherans we are reminded that through our baptisms, we have already died with Christ. We have drowned that old creature and become a new creation in the waters of our baptism. Jesus' death on the cross did the work of salvation for us. It is vanity to worry about that. As Luther taught us, we are saved by grace through faith, by the work Jesus did for us on the cross. It is vanity to think otherwise. Nothing and nobody can take this gift of God from you or any of us. We don't need to worry about what happens when we die, but instead turn in thanks for the promise, the gift, the saving that Jesus has done for us. This is our assurance. This is our faith. This is what stands sure and steady against all our worry and fear. Against all that vanity. Against that Hebel.

It isn't that our lives and our life's work come to nothing in the end. That isn't what our readings are telling us today, rather all our time and treasure, our worry and restlessness when given to God, are transformed by God. Are taken out of our hands. Are no longer any of our business. What we turn over God will transform.

This is what Paul means, and I am going to paraphrase here, when he says, "Strip off your old self and clothe yourself with new life, which is renewed in your Creator." It is in this new life that you and I walk together in God. It is in the promise and practice of this new life that we begin living into God's kin-dom, while we are still here. Where we can let go of our worry and all that vanity and put our trust in our God.

When we do this our vision is transformed. Our lives take on renewed meaning. We let go of worry and anxiety about what is next and rest in God's promise. Finally, we know Paul's words are true, that Christ is all, and in all, of us. We begin to get a little of the kin-dom vision. We get a taste of that kin-dom living. Finally, we begin to find Jesus in all the places we used to store up our worry and our anxiety and our fear. Finally, we begin to build a larger barn for our faith, our gratitude, our hope, and our love.

We can say like the German poet Rilke when he wrote:

“I find you, Lord, in all Things and in all  
my fellow creatures, pulsing with your life;  
as a tiny seed you sleep in what is small  
and in the vast you vastly reveal yourself.

The wondrous game that power plays with Things  
is to move in such submission through the world:  
groping in roots and growing thick in trunks  
and in treetops like a rising from the dead.”

Amen? Amen!