“Who wants my life?”

A Sermon by the Rev. Rachel Wildman

Sunday, July 31st 2016, Proper 13 year C

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Psalm 49:1-11

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

*“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 (scholars suggest more apt translations may be absurdity [or meaningless])[[1]](#footnote-1). So I turned and gave my heart up to despair.”*

We can hear the cry of injustice…All of the work swiped from his grasp just as he was about to finally reap the benefits.

AD LIBBED MY OWN STORY OF HAVING MY WORK BE ENJOYED BY ANOTHER

I’m sure each of you have your own stories of toiling only to have the fruits of that hard work enjoyed by someone else. It can make our efforts seem meaningless—even absurd.

And yet, as natural as the frustration and anger is, I want to challenge it. Despite what we may imagine about the social standing of our author based on the disempowerment he writes of in this passage, he is not a slave; he is not even in the working class—toiling endlessly but still able to have some control over his life’s circumstances. As he tells us in the first line, he is a King of Israel! Whether or not *that* is actually true, he is a person of privilege—a person who has the time and the educational level sufficient to apply himself to gaining “Wisdom”. He is, by most accounts, among the highest ranks of his society’s hierarchy.

Now, wealth and power in ancient Israel didn’t flow exactly as they do today, but things were not *so* radically different then. We can fairly safely assume that our author, our King of Israel, has had a great deal of control over his life and his labors, as well as the lives and labors of others. Perhaps more relevant to the despair he feels at having to give it up to one who comes after him, we can also fairly safely assume that he has received much from not only the labors of those who serve him, but also from those powerful and enslaved, who came before him.

Yet, he sees only what *he* must give over. He sees nothing of what has been given over to him. But, I am certain that there is much that he inherited from those leaders and family who came before him--Perhaps even more from those who now serve him, and yet, who will never experience any control over what they have produced, forced to give it all to him.

He, in all his supposed Wisdom, seems to me to be wearing the blinders of privilege. I know—the dreaded P-word—all over Facebook and newsfeeds in this age of a revived civil rights movement. Privilege is my own second-skin, as a white, highly-educated woman from a long line of white, highly-educated, upper middle and upper class ancestors. I have worked immensely hard for all I have achieved. Yet, in recent months, as I have begun the uncomfortable work of interrogating both my skin color and my class, I am beginning to see with increasing clarity that my success, my financial comfort, the authority and power I have over my own life is due not only to my own diligent and good-natured efforts, but to all that society has handed to me as one implicitly trusted and respected.

I could choose to not learn more…I could choose to remain as our King of Israel-- unconcsious of the extent to which I have inherited, by the chance of my birth, the opportunity for security and comfort, opportunities for compelling work and invigorating play, and the driving force behind my hard work—the assumption that I am entitled to be fulfilled. It definitely seems easier most days to choose not to see.

But I have come to learn that in choosing not to see, I am imposing absurdity and the potential for meaninglessness on the lives of those who toil all around but don’t have the same Privilege…those who toil beside me with no reasonable expectation that they will enjoy the same agency and security in their own lives, even with such hard work. If I choose not to learn more about my own privilege, I am denying the possibility that what has been given to me will someday be given to all. If I choose not to see, there is no way that I can ever share what I have been given by default with those who deserve it just as much as I do.

In the midst of protests and shootings, of a polarized presidential election, of draughts and floods that claim the lives and livelihoods of those with the fewest resources, the words of our Gospel parable reverberate. “This very day your life is being demanded of you!” This line was the line that caught me when I first began meditating on our readings for today weeks ago. It ate at me—I knew it to be true that this very day my life IS being demanded of me…But, for days, I couldn’t understand by whom? Who is asking for my life?

And then, as I sat with the Ecclesiases reading, and as I re-read our summer reading, “Waking up White,” and as I watched Muslim-American Kzir Khan’s speech at the Democratic National Convention, and as I watched my seminary and its radical role in God’s work of justice essentially close its doors, I could see who was asking. There was a sea of faces—all those who have worked so diligently as I and yet have been reminded by our institutions that their work will not get them what my work has gotten me…all those whose work is never even noticed…all those whose work is noticed and used, but represents such a threat that their work has been taken and they have been refused the possibility of making home in these borders….all those whose very physical selves render the possibility of creating and working all but impossible.

This sea of faces is asking for *my* life—for the same sort of life that I have—for the security that I enjoy…for the astounding potential that I have been gifted for doing meaningful, inspiring work…for the very possibility of making meaning from my life by knowing that the results of my toiling will be shared with the world as it ripples from person to person across space, and even time.

I imagine that like me, many of your lives are being demanded of you as well. May I, may we all, be rich toward God, alive and yearning in every person. AMEN.

\*\*This sermon informed by the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary (Through Ministry Matters database) sections on Ecclesiastes and the Gospel of Luke

1. New Interpreter’s Bible [↑](#footnote-ref-1)