

## Introduction

The Scriptures are a rich treasury of human experience and stories, which have inspired and aided people throughout the ages to find what gives meaning and purpose to life. Today let's explore these human experiences and a parable shared by Jesus, to better grasp what makes life worth living.

## Confronting Life's Meaning in Today's Readings

*First*, we begin with our reading today from Ecclesiastes, where we hear an aged teacher reflect back on his life and life in general. While he affirms that wisdom excels folly, as light excels darkness, he still sees human character and accomplishments as not really achieving anything truly lasting. He realizes that the wise will die, just like the fools die. In both cases, it seems to him that all is vanity, a breath, unsubstantial and fleeting. Yet, though later in verses 24-26 (added to today's reading), though reason leaves him baffled, he moves on to affirm that life with all its limitations is still worth living, because it is God's gift to us.

<sup>24</sup>There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; <sup>25</sup>for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? <sup>26</sup>For to the one who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy; but to the sinner, he gives the work of gathering and reaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Yes, it is God, the source of all life, who can help us make sense of our lives. Some people find this to be pessimistic view ("all is vanity and a chasing after wind"), but it seems to me to be a realistic view of life. Indeed, so much of our wisdom, knowledge, and striving are but chasing after the wind. The aged sage passes on this wisdom to future generations including those of us here today, not to spread doubt or despair, but to strip away our illusions of success and security.

*Next*, we come to today's Gospel, which is really a story within in a story. The "outer" story tells us about Jesus' encounter one day with a younger brother, who knows that he will never benefit from the labors and achievements of his father. In that day and time, he had no legitimate claim on the family inheritance, but he asks Jesus to step in on his side and support him in his claim for half of the inheritance which he believes should come to him. In a world where land and possessions were scarce, the right of the eldest son to inherit all was a way of preserving the whole family's security. Jesus, however, chooses not to mediate in

this dispute. Instead, he challenges the younger brother to think of his own covetousness and draw his own conclusion about what can give his life meaning. In effect he warns him to be on guard against greed, for life does not consist in the abundance of possessions – whether you are the younger brother who inherits nothing or the elder brother who stands to inherit everything.

*Thus*, we come to the story within the story, the parable Jesus uses to help not just that young man, but everyone then, and also today, to ponder what makes life worth living. This has been titled “The Parable of the Rich Fool.” It is a story of a clever farmer – smart and organized. The land has produced abundantly for this farmer who is already rich. Rather than selling his overabundance of crops at the reduced prices they would bring on the current market, the farmer decides to hold back his goods for a later time of scarcity, so he can make a big profit. So, he builds bigger barns, and sits back to “eat, drink, and be merry.” But reality comes crashing in. He wakes up at night in a cold sweat, hearing God’s voice: “This night you will die, and what will happen with all your treasures, with all your possessions and accomplishments?”

This story within a story, which challenges us all, when Luke returns to the “outer” story and Jesus says: <sup>21</sup>So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

## **The World**

Yes, we must all face this challenge. How can we find meaning in life? If we are only concerned with success, then we have a limited kind of security. Being concerned only with success narrows our horizon and blinds us to the vertical dimension of life... we forget to look up! So, can we find richness in God that makes life more meaningful than grabbing, hoarding, or fixating on life’s possessions, either on what we have or on what we’ve lost?

Now, I want to share with you two contemporary stories, both of which have served for me as guideposts for my own life and what makes it meaningful for me.

This first story could be entitled “The Gospel of Prosperity” or “Self and Where It Leads.” It begins with a story of earthly success but ends as a story of lives found to be not worth living. In 1923 there was a meeting held at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. In attendance were nine of the world’s most successful financiers... men who had found the secret of making money. Charles Schwab was president of the largest independent steel company. Samuel Insull was a British born American who became president of the largest utility company. Howard Hobson was president of the largest gas Company. Arthur Cotton was a leading wheat speculator. Richard Whitney was president of the New York Stock

Exchange. Albert Fall was a member of the President's Cabinet. Jesse Livermore was the sharpest investor on Wall Street. Ivan Krueger was the "Match" king, head of the world's largest monopoly at that time. Finally, there was Leon Fraser, president of the World Bank.

These nine men were the epitome of success in their day but within the next 25 years, this was their fate. Charles Schwab died bankrupt and lived on borrowed money for five years before his death. Insull died a fugitive from justice, living penniless in a foreign land. Hopson went insane. Cotton died overseas, unable to pay his debts. Whitney served time in Sing-Sing penitentiary. Albert Fall was pardoned from prison, so he could die at home. And the last three: Livermore, Fraser, and Krueger each gave in to despair and committed suicide. All of these men learned well the art of making money, but not one of them learned to how to live. The bulls of the market became like lambs led to slaughter. In 1930 Schwab was quoted, as saying: "I'm afraid; everyone is. I don't know, we don't know, whether the values we have are going to be real next month or not."

Contrast this story with a second contemporary story. Millard Fuller, who today we esteem as the founder of Habitat for Humanity, was already a millionaire at the age of twenty-nine. Born in 1935, he had married in 1959. At that time, he was a contractor, who was dedicating all his time and talent to pile up riches for himself. Then, when he was obsessed with trying to grow his million into millions, his life was suddenly shattered in 1966, when his wife of 6 years announced she was leaving him. This led him to face the consequences of his actions in life, for he was gripped by despair, as he realized what he had become and what he had lost: his values, his family, his friends, and his faith.

In despair, he turned to a recognized Biblical scholar and farmer he'd met: Clarence Jordan, who back in 1942 had established Koinonia Farm, an interracial farming community in southwest Georgia. Over the next two years, he came to realize that he had to turn his life around. He got help and eventually talked with his wife about his change of heart, leading to their reconciliation. Out of his change of heart he not only saved his marriage but found meaning and purpose in his life. He realized that the blessings he enjoyed were meant to be shared and enjoyed by others, and that God's blessings are in our lives to flow through our hands to others.

So in 1968, after giving up their wealth to refocus their lives on Christian service, they moved with their children to Koinonia Farm and lived there for five years learning about faith and how they could find lives worth living. After 5 years in this community, in 1973, they became missionaries in the Disciples of Christ denomination and moved to take the concept of providing habitat for people to Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo. After three years of hard work there and launching a successful house building program they returned to the

United States and in 1976 founded Habitat for Humanity, an ecumenical Christian ministry dedicated to eliminating poverty. Habitat now works in all 50 states in the U.S. and in more than 70 countries and has helped more than 39 million people achieve strength, stability, and independence through safe, decent, and affordable shelter.

## **Conclusion**

What can we do and what do we do to make every day of our lives, life worth living? Certainly, we all aren't able to be like the Fullers, Jordan, or Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter (notable for their work with Habitat for Humanity), but we can be God's servants in this time and place. May the stories I've shared today prompt us to think about the meaning of our lives! Do we appreciate and thank God for the blessings placed in our hands? How have we passed them on and used them to foster life-giving relationships with God and with others?

Amen.