

EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 31, 2022

ECCLESIASTES 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23 | PSALM 49:1-12 | COLOSSIANS 3:1-11 | LUKE 12:13-21

Last week, there was a big Evan Osnos piece in the *New Yorker* about yachts.¹ If you—like me—are a lay person in the yachting world, you come away with two big takeaways. The first is how enormous these yachts are. There are not only yachts but super yachts and gigayachts. Some of these are so large they can fit a submarine marina in the belly of the ship. The second take away is related to the first. No matter how big these yachts get, they are never big enough. Osnos recounts one broker in the yacht industry with a client who “owns three big yachts... It’s a hobby for him. We’re at a hundred and ninety-one feet now, and last night he said, ‘You know, what do you think about getting a two hundred and fifty?’” It’s not the last upgrade this guy is going to want.

In today’s reading from Colossians, the author lists a whole bunch of vain pursuits. Malice, evil desires, etc. And they include greed on that list. That’s not wholly surprising. But what’s interesting about that is they feel a need to add a little note after greed to explain the greed is a form of idolatry. The author could be suggesting that greed will lead you to worship money instead of worshipping God. Or that you’ll trust material possessions instead of trusting God.

But there’s a deeper connection, too. The appeal of idols is that you can always have one more. If there’s something in your life that isn’t going the way you want, you just find the idol that promises to fix it and tack it on with all the other ones. And if that one doesn’t work, you just go find another one. And another one. And another one. To worship idols is to always be in the process of acquiring something. *We’re at a hundred and ninety-one feet now... What do you think about getting a two hundred and fifty?*

Some of the early Christians said that we’re born with a God-shaped hole in our soul.² And that we spend our lives trying to fill it. We try to fill it with possessions and money. We try to fill it with acclaim and ego. We try to fill it with relationships and jobs. We try to fill it with a two-hundred-foot yacht, and, when that doesn’t work, assume that the problem is that the yacht isn’t big enough. But no matter what we try to fill it with, it never quite satisfies us. And we still feel restless.

It is, of course, easy to use yachts as an example here because—to the best of my knowledge—no one here owns one. And so it is easy to think that the author of Colossians has nothing to say to us. But I think most of us know that’s really not true. The man who swears he’ll be happy once he finally gets a bigger yacht might be wealthier than us, but we’re not much wiser.

That image of the restless soul is at the heart of today’s gospel reading. Jesus tells the story of a man whose land produces abundantly. He fills up his barns with all his grain and possessions. In the social context Jesus was living in, this is someone who is doing well. This

¹ “The Age of the Superyacht | The New Yorker,” accessed July 26, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/07/25/the-haves-and-the-have-yachts>.

² The image is Augustinian, but the origin of the exact phrase is unclear. I think it shows up in Pascal somewhere?

is not someone just scraping by. He has more than enough to live a comfortable life. And when the barns fill up, what does he do? He might decide to go help his neighbors. Maybe give them some of his grain. Maybe help them build some barns. But that's not what he does. No, he decides to tear down the barns and build gigantic storehouses.³ He's basically saying *We're at a hundred and ninety-one feet now. What do you think about going two hundred and fifty?*

And his plan works. He sits back and looks out over the storehouses of goods he's amassed. He's ready to "relax, eat, drink, [and] be merry." He has the security to finally start living. Except what happens? He dies.

"One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions," Jesus tells us. He leaves off the unspoken ending which is that one's life is sustained by the abundant generosity of God. God has given this man life and food and sustenance and neighbors to serve and love. And what does the man do? He loads it up in a warehouse where it collects dust while he returns to ashes. What makes the rich man in the parable foolish is that he thinks he can find the security to really start living by becoming independent of the source of his life and the people God has given him to love. He has everything he needs to survive, but all of his efforts yield him no life.

The alternative, Jesus suggests, is richness toward God. And, as the author of Colossians reminds us, our richness toward God is rooted in God's richness toward us. We have been "clothed... with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator." To be rich toward God, to be renewed in the image of our creator, is to reflect God's lovingkindness and care for our neighbors.

In Jesus, God fills the God-shaped hole in our hearts. As we often say in our intercessory prayers, God gives rest to our restless hearts. God gives us the confidence to receive our life with others instead of acquiring it for ourselves. After all, Jesus tells us, the kingdom of God can't be bought or acquired or stored away in a warehouse. It can only be received anew every single day. And that is exactly what God does for us and this entire community of faith whenever we gather around the means of grace.

And so instead of spending our lives trying to acquire the thing that's finally going to make us feel whole, we are empowered to bring God's wholeness into the world as we inspire, strengthen, and give hope together as the body of Christ. For whenever we gather together around God's gifts, the author of Colossians proclaims, "there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!"

And where Christ is, there too is the kingdom of God. Today and every day, Christ fills our hearts so that our lives might satisfy the world's hunger for justice and peace.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

³ The images here resonate with Pharaoh's economy in Egypt in Exodus. The argument about who set Jesus up as a judge is also borrowed from Exodus.