

Sunday, July 26, 2020  
*Sermon Series: Didn't See It Coming*

## Why Money, Power, and Success Can Leave Us Feeling Empty

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### **Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 NRSV**

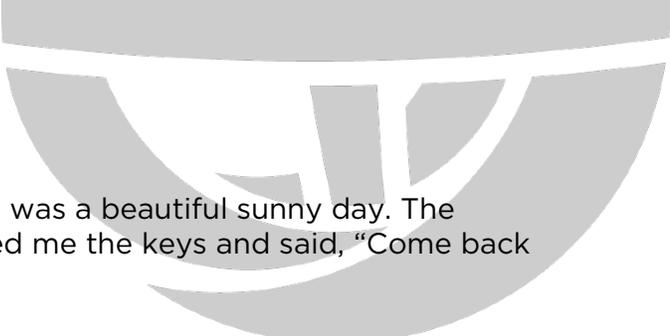
I said to myself, “Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But again, this also was vanity. <sup>2</sup>I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” <sup>3</sup>I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine—my mind still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life. <sup>4</sup>I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; <sup>5</sup>I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. <sup>6</sup>I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. <sup>7</sup>I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. <sup>8</sup>I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines.

<sup>9</sup>So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. <sup>10</sup>Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. <sup>11</sup>Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Erica and I have been driving a 2006 Ford Focus station wagon for the last 12 years. We bought it when Ellie was born, and we needed room for her car seat and our dog when we traveled. It's been a great car for a long time. But, recently we've been thinking that maybe it is time to replace it.

Several weeks ago, I found a 2016 Audi Q5 for a really good deal. In fact, it wasn't any more than any other car like that would have cost. And I'll be honest, I've been a bit fixated on the Q5 for a long time, but always thought that it was way out of my league. A pipe dream for a middle aged guy, or something. This one wasn't, so I showed the car to Erica - who is infinitely more reasonable and grounded than I am. She surprised me when she said, “Yeah, go test drive it”. It took a few days to get an appointment. So every night for a week, I looked up more stats and reviews on Audi Q5, anticipating how great it was





going to be to sit behind the wheel. The day came, it was a beautiful sunny day. The dealer answered the questions I had, and then handed me the keys and said, “Come back in 30-45 minutes.”

I was so excited. The engine hummed to life, and I took off toward a country road to check out all it could do – within the law – of course.

By the time I returned, the excitement had mellowed. There was nothing wrong with the car. It was beautiful and a delight to drive. It’s just that I realized that what I was expecting from the car wasn’t going to really give me what I was really looking for.

American marketing and our models of success were working in me and on me. The marketing industry has a formula for getting people to buy their stuff, it’s called WIFM, or *What’s In It For Me*. When advertisers sell things, they aren’t just selling stuff, they are trying to sell you on something much more – usually success, or power, or status. They are trying to appeal to your sense of “what’s in it for me” or for you, beyond the actual product. Let me be clear, it’s not wrong to have nice things, even luxurious things. What can be challenging is why we choose to have them. If I’m honest, the thought of driving an Audi Q5 was probably more about having some symbol of success than it was about driving a car.

I was allowing a newer, better, brighter product - a car in this case - to make me think that it would lead to a newer, better, brighter me. I doubt that I’m alone in ever thinking this. It’s certainly not the first time, and probably won’t be the last that I try to improve myself by improving something I own. How about you? Just remember that billions of dollars are spent every year trying to get you to think this way, but in the long run it’s not the most fulfilling way to live. Substituting stuff for the truly fulfilling way of life is one of the timeless ways we miss the mark of who God has created and called us to be.

At the end of a long and successful life, the author of Ecclesiastes reflected on all that he acquired and accomplished. It was greater and “surpassed all who were in Jerusalem before” him, he wrote. But in the end, he called it meaninglessness and a chasing after the wind. It sounds like a manifesto against materialism, doesn’t it? But a more careful reading of Ecclesiastes points us to why accumulating stuff may leave us feeling more empty than full. What it seems is actually meaningless is the self-centered nature of his pursuits. The author uses “I”, “me”, or “my” thirty times (30) in eleven verses. The wise wealthy old man had as much an excess of ego as he had an excess of stuff. And in the end, in his wisdom, he finally realized that no amount of stuff made him who he was.

I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. But remember, BILLIONS of dollars are being spent right now trying to convince you that the most important question we need to ask ourselves each day is, WIFM “What’s in it for me?”

But what happens when we remember that our well-being is tied to the well-being of others, when we remember that we are each part of a larger story beyond ourselves? Because, friends, that is how God designed us. And when we are in tune with how our Creator created us, we are more than likely going to find fullness in life. When God placed people in creation, God created two, not one so that they could help each other.





When God called Abraham and made covenant, God said that Abraham's descendants would outnumber the stars in the sky. It wasn't about Abraham, it was about future generations and God's abiding love throughout those generations. When Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, he called twelve friends to follow him and taught them to do what he did. He told them, "Those who want to be first will be last and servant to all, and those who want to find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will find it." He told them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing...and teaching them" that they are part of God's amazing and wonderful story, too! Let those of us with ears, listen!

When we lose sight of the amazing and interwoven life that God has created us to be part of, we lose something of ourselves, and frankly, without that we can't be full.

Here's how I see it: money, power, and success unto themselves leave us empty and yearning for more to life. Yet, when we see these things simply as tools that allow us to take part in the bigger story that God is unfolding before us, they can be part of creating real and abundant life.

Money is a tool that allows us to provide for ourselves and our families, but it is also a tool for loving and serving others. I was talking to a parishioner the other day who has been scrimping and working hard to pay off debts. She was telling me how hard she was working, and I could tell she was proud of the fact that she was finally getting ahead after feeling behind for so long. And then she said, "I've even been able to finally give what I've wanted to give to church." She remembered that she was part of a bigger story and wanted to participate, and when she did she felt fuller. You don't have to be the richest, most powerful, most successful person to play a big role in God's unfolding story.

You don't have to have a bunch of diplomas hanging on your wall, or carry a title to have power. When I was in seminary, I was involved in faith-based community organizing. I learned there that power is simply the ability to influence others. Erica and I were part of a small church near the capital, and together with people of faith from other, mostly small churches across the city, we influenced city and state officials to invest and make commitments to issues that mattered in our faith communities and neighborhoods. None of us were insiders in the halls of power, but we found we could work together for the sake of our neighbors and it felt like we were all part of God's unfolding story of grace and community.

Friends, there are countless voices coming at us every day telling us to look for what's in it for us. I urge you to not stop there. We are more than the sum of our possessions and God counts our successes in much more than money and power. God has fearfully and wonderfully made you. God has called you into community, whether it is family, friends, co-workers, or this church community - so that you are not left empty. Keep your hearts and your eyes open to God's amazing unfolding story before you. And may that story fill you. Amen.

