

LECTIONARY 18 [Proper 13] (C-RCL) – July 31, 2022

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Psalm 49:1-11; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21
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*Life can't be counted in candles
or measured in years
that have flown...*

*It's counted in kindnesses,
close friends and loved ones,
and in all the sweet blessings
we've known.*

[Front cover verse on birthday card from Pat Criste, 7.22.2022]

This Hallmark verse was on the cover of a card my clergy friend sent to me earlier this month for my birthday.

Birthdays – especially as one gets older – can be a good time to think about the “sweet blessings” or the *true treasures* of one’s life, to reflect on what is really important, to think about an *inheritance*, to ponder one’s *legacy*. Other milestones can also act as markers for considering *the meaning of one’s work and life*. Perhaps you’ve just moved from a place you’ve called home for decades. Maybe you are newly married. Perhaps you’re a recent graduate who’s preparing for more education in the fall. Maybe you are experiencing new health concerns. Perhaps you’re facing a transition in your career, as I was the first time I preached on today’s texts. Or just maybe you are part of a community that’s anticipating a new pastor, as we are here at UniLu!

So, the first time I preached on these texts was August 3, 1986, my last Sunday as an intern at Trinity Lutheran Church in Chelmsford. When I first studied the readings in preparation for that day, I wondered, “How can *these* lessons be the texts for an appropriate farewell sermon?” But then, all at once, after reading the lessons one more time, I laughed! Imagine that you are the intern who is leaving your role, and passing the work to another intern – and now listen again to these words from our First Reading, from Ecclesiastes — and here I read from the Revised Standard Version, the translation in use at that time: “I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, *seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me; and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun.*” [Ecclesiastes 2:18-19a,b, RSV, emphasis added] Ah! Granted, I had already met Steve, the next year’s intern, as well as his spouse Leslie, and had found them delightful – but here was a clue for how to approach my sermon!

You see, in my case, as the intern, it *wasn’t* true that I’d hated my toil or that what I’d worked for and earned hadn’t meant anything to me. Nor had I come to regret working hard. Yet there was for me the wonder of what the person coming after me would continue. And the congregation and I *were* experiencing an ending, a leave-taking.

Henri Nouwen speaks of leave-taking in his book, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ*. Though he is speaking about the leave-taking that follows hospital and home visits, I think that this section can also apply to, for example, a friend’s leaving – or a co-worker’s, or a community member’s, or – even – a pastor’s:

I am deeply convinced [Nouwen says] that there is a ministry in which our leaving creates space for God's spirit and in which, by our absence, God can become present in a new way. There is an enormous difference between an absence after a visit and an absence which is the result of not coming at all. Without a coming there can be no leaving, and without a presence absence is only emptiness and not the way to a greater intimacy with God through the Spirit. [Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), pp. 44-45]

And saying good-bye across any number of milestones throughout one's life is part of the pain that comes with intimacy. Once, when I was trying to type the verse from Ecclesiastes that says, "As long as you *live*, everything you do brings nothing but worry and heartache," what I *actually* typed was, "As long as you *love*, everything you do brings nothing but worry and heartache." This was a magical kind of typo that made me stop and think. Granted, that's only part of the story— but when we become involved with each other, when we make commitments, when we allow ourselves to become intimate with others, when we care about them, that is when we become vulnerable – and part of vulnerability is being left open to pain as well as joy.

At Trinity, I was one in a line of interns; at UniLu, I have been one of the congregational leaders charged with maintaining continuity and providing pastoral care during our congregation's time between pastors. *Today* marks the last day of the five-month period since Pastor Kathleen's retirement. *Tomorrow* we anticipate the arrival of a new pastor, Pastor Carrie. This will mark the birth of a new relationship between pastor and congregation.

I don't know how many birthdays the author of our First Reading from Ecclesiastes had had when writing today's passage, but it is written from the perspective of a teacher looking back over a life lived, sharing lessons learned. The discussion that concerns the Teacher in this First Reading deals with the ambiguity of leaving an inheritance "to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it." [Ecclesiastes 1:21b] And today's *Gospel* opens with "someone" in the crowd asking Jesus (who is addressed as "Teacher") to tell the someone's sibling to share the family inheritance!

Ah, yes! Inheritance! Families! I was astonished to learn that after my maternal grandmother died, some of my mom's siblings weren't speaking to each other for even *years* afterward, due to some disputed disposition of the farmland! My siblings and I took my mom's experience to heart, such that when our parents died, we were particularly careful of each other when dealing with our inheritance.

While considering the issue of passing on an inheritance, the Teacher in Ecclesiastes laments – and here I read from an alternate translation:

You work and worry your way through life, and what do you have to show for it? As long as you live, everything you do brings nothing but worry and heartache. Even at night your mind can't rest. It is all useless. [Ecclesiastes 2:22-23, *Good News Bible / Today's English Version*, American Bible Society]

These words may well strike a responsive chord in many of us "harried, overworked, overextended church members!" [R. Alan Culpepper, *Proclamation 3, Pentecost 2, Series C* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p 16] I know that anxiety over one's health, concern over the direction of

this country, or worry over various situations in the world can certainly keep one awake at night!

That lament we find in Ecclesiastes, then, can apply not only to what we leave as a legacy but also to what we inherit. For example, at high-tech companies, programmers and technical writers may work very hard, only to see their work later mangled by those working on the next release. Or they may inherit poor work from *previous* employees and must now deal with it. [Bruce Broolsma in conversation]

But what about inheritance and legacy, more generally? What is being bequeathed to those who come after us? What *health issues* are we passing on to biological children? What *attitudes* and *values* are we transmitting to the next generation? Questions of legacy can apply: 1) to international communities; 2) to us as individuals, and 3) to us as a congregation.

+ First, on the international level, I note: On June 2, 2022, at the Stockholm+50 International meeting, “speakers from across the globe warned world leaders” that: “Unless action is taken now, younger generations will inherit a planet that is ‘broken and unliveable’”. [<https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/envdev2047.doc.htm>] *What kind of legacy is this for future generations?*

+ Second, on the individual level, questions arise: *When is enough enough? For me personally: How do I deal with the over 60 boxes of books, cassette tapes, and assorted other items that my brother sent from our late sister’s house, which are currently all in my basement?? And what do I do with the 187,000 messages in my e-mail inbox?!? Am I leaving a legacy of stuff?? And for us corporately: What happens if we hoard toilet paper? When does one own too many sets of dishes – or computers – or books – or – shoes – or – ? I don’t know – you fill in the*

blank! What about those various and sundry items that we just “might need some day”? How do we best save time, money, and/or things for a rainy day; how do we prepare for any number of potential disasters? What is the best form of life insurance – a plastic card? Eating whole foods and low sugar? Can we insure life?

+ And lastly, on the congregational level – to bring it back to UniLu, we reflect: In the late 1990s, the theme for the UniLu Capital Campaign was: “Building for the Next Generation”. Rather than *tearing down* this barn, the congregation made a commitment to *repair* and *refurbish* this building – at the time, for the Sunday School children, for the shelter guests, and for community artists; in later years, for Sanctuary guests – Ana, Erica, and Briana, and, in more recent years, for the Floor Lords’ dance studio; and now, the We Are Called committee is inviting us to imagine yet again how our physical space can be renewed to best serve the needs of the community at large. *What legacy does this congregation want to leave for future generations?*

And now I ask you: What legacy are we leaving for Pastor Carrie? What will she inherit when she arrives tomorrow?

I think that *one* legacy we offer her is a strong sense of community, which we as the UniLu community have maintained during these recent five months of pastoral transition. I would like to acknowledge the work of the Search Committee in bringing Pastor Carrie to us. I am grateful for the faithful leadership of Pastor Gracious and the Church Council; I am thankful for the dedicated team of tech vergers, who “keep on tweaking” details so that those worshippers in person and those on Zoom – across the country and around the world – may have a good worship

experience; I give thanks for the UniLu staff – for Jonathan Mott, for Kris McQuage-Loukas, for MC Miller – and for those who have kept the building clean and tidy; I appreciate the ministry of all the deacons, sacristans, readers, intercessors, ushers, musicians, assisting ministers, narthex attendants, coffee hour hosts, UniLu Cares team, Bible study leaders, *Inkspot* editors, banner hangers, art archivists, GBIO leaders, visitors who join us for worship, shelter staff, and those who challenge us to make a difference beyond these walls; and I say “thank you!” to the preachers and presiders who said “yes” to my invitations – to Gracious Moyo, of course, but also to Elyse Nelson Winger, Angelika Zollfrank, Andrew Heisen, Jessica Chicka, Aimee Hein, and Paul Santmire. And I am grateful for the service that the onboarding team and the installation planning team will continue to offer as Pastor Carrie begins her time with us here at UniLu.

And now, as we celebrate the birth of this new chapter at UniLu as Pastor Carrie joins us, let us as a congregation ask: *What changes might Pastor Carrie encourage us to make? Which “ways we’ve always done things” will be challenged?* (For example, how can the in-person Communion distribution become even more inclusive?) *With a new pair of eyes, what will Carrie notice that we’ve missed?* (For example, when we first enter the building where’s the sign for rest rooms??) What ways might additional art supplement the careful use of banners and artwork already in place? What about liturgical dance? How can we best respond to the needs of the neighbors who surround us here in Harvard Square and the greater Boston area?)

Zooming out a bit to the Gospel: Someone who was *not* interested in responding to the needs of his neighbors was the rich man in today’s parable. His land has “produced abundantly”. Does this rich man think of sharing this bounty, these treasures of the

land? Apparently not. He thinks only of his *own* desires, his *own* enjoyment, his *own* security. Concern for the good of the *commonwealth* seems not to have entered his consciousness. For he muses to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” [Luke 12:17b, NRSV]

Now, some of us may be able to relate, on some level, to that rich man. We may have had years of college, graduate school, seminary, or on-the-job training; we may have had decades of richly productive work with a company; we may have bulging 401ks (although perhaps not, if you are a millennial); we may have invested our energies in raising children to become productive citizens — but now find ourselves with nowhere to go – or with no energy to get there. We may have immersed ourselves in social justice work, or in environmental concerns – but now find ourselves overwhelmed with the enormity of the work remaining, or the uncertainty of the continued existence of life on this earth.

When I finished my internship at Trinity that summer of 1986, I had no call from a congregation or agency; for a year, I had no “barn” in which to preach and preside at the celebration of the Sacraments. Perhaps some of you have your own stories of waiting for the results of your own metaphorical “planting”; that nebulosity and ambiguity of not knowing how things will ultimately turn out.

But in our Gospel reading today, Jesus tells us that our true life is *not* made up of the things we own, the 401K, or housing “trees” we’ve “planted and tilled”. You see, it’s not about how materially rich we may be. The real riches of life are the intangibles, those centered around light and love and, yes, faith. The richness of my life as an intern among the members of Trinity certainly was not centered around the stipend I received. (In case you were

wondering: At least in those days, one didn't make oodles of money as a congregational intern!) The riches I received were, rather, wrapped in shared experiences; the treasures were the warm memories.

What are the intangible – or even invisible – treasures of this congregation? Of the church in general? Perhaps you've heard this story about Lawrence. Next month – on August 10th – is the date for the commemoration of Lawrence, who was martyred in the year 258 CE during the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Valerian. Lawrence was chief of the seven deacons of Rome. In his role as deacon, "Lawrence was responsible for the material goods of the Church and the distribution of alms to the poor." When the Roman prefect demanded that Lawrence turn over the riches of the Church, he "asked for three days to gather the wealth. He worked swiftly to distribute as much Church property to the indigent as possible, so as to prevent it being seized by the prefect. On the third day, at the head of a small delegation, he presented himself to the prefect". [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Lawrence] When ordered to deliver the treasures of the Church he presented those who were poor, those who were blind or lame, those with leprosy, and those who were orphaned or widowed. "These," he declared, "are the true treasures of the Church." [G. William Zuspan, *Christ in Our Home: Light for Today*, July, August, September 1995, Thursday, August 10, p 43]

This congregation of UniLu has, through the years, inherited rich treasures of light, love, and faith. From the early beginnings in 1912 that called together a small group of students at Harvard, to its presence in Harvard Square since 1928, UniLu "has been a place where both students and members of the surrounding communities [can] worship, learn, break bread together, serve the community, and advocate for justice side by side." [<https://www.unilu.org/about/history/>]

Thus, giving thanks for this heritage, and building on this legacy, let us remember as we face our next transition, that it is Christ's luminous and glorious relationship with us that makes us rich and calls us forth to new life.