

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – August 4, 2019
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Some years ago, I went to visit a friend who was a pastor in Pensacola. Lathered with extra-strength sunblock, I spent an afternoon at the beach. As I arrived, a young family was completing quite a project – they were building a sand castle. Now many things have gotten more complicated since I was a child, and – apparently – sand castle construction is one of them. When I was a kid, we built a castle with a little plastic shovel and a pail. Now, it seems, children must have a sand castle kit – complete with plastic forms for turrets, and walls and trim. The castle that this young father and his small children constructed was quite elaborate. At the end, they signed their work. Mom took a picture of dad and the kids smiling proudly with their masterpiece. Then they packed up their castle building kit, their towels and sunscreen and left their structure behind. It stood proudly for about twenty minutes. Then the wind shifted, the water started coming in closer and gradually, the ocean reclaimed the sand used to build the castle. First one turret, then a wall, then eventually the entire castle washed away. That young family’s afternoon project was completely gone about thirty minutes after they had left it behind.

In the gospel today, Jesus is confronted by a family dispute – one man in the crowd asking Jesus to tell his brother to share the inheritance with him. Now he didn’t ask Jesus for food or for a cure or for a job. Presumably, he had enough money to live on and was capable of working. He just wanted a portion of the inheritance. Perhaps he thought that he was entitled to it, though he didn’t explain why he hadn’t received it earlier. Jesus refused to be drawn into the conflict. Instead, he warned the crowd against greed, telling them the story of a rich man who did not have enough room to store all of his harvest. He planned to tear down his old barns so that he could build larger ones. The harvest was his, after all. He worked for it – why should he not enjoy all of the benefits of his labor? Why should he not keep all of the grain his harvest had yielded? Sure, he could have given the excess away to the hungry rather than going to the expense of building new barns, but if that thought crossed his mind, it was quickly dismissed. God says to that man in the parable, “You fool, this day your life will be demanded of you, and the things you have prepared – all of that grain you have stored – to whom will they belong?” What good is a large storage bin – or a large bank account, for that matter – if you don’t have the time to enjoy it? As Qoheleth says in our first reading, all things are vanity – all material things are sought and acquired in vain. In the end, they do not matter. In effect, Jesus is telling us the same thing. Though material goods look to be important, that inheritance, those larger new barns would be just as valuable, just as permanent, as that sand castle

left behind on Pensacola beach. Ultimately, they will all disappear. Oh, it may take a while, but nothing lasts forever. Want proof? Have you driven through Memphis recently? When I was growing up, we shopped at Goldsmith's and Lowenstein's, Dixie Mart and Carondelet, TG&Y and JB Hunter. I'm guessing you haven't been in those stores lately. Indeed, some of you no longer go to stores – just Amazon. Our society seeks out the newest, the largest, the most trendy – and it leaves behind the old to be washed away like a sand castle – or gradually destroyed by urban decay.

Yes, we hear these readings with their warnings against greed and we shake our heads at our society and especially at all of those rich people to whom this parable is addressed. Why are they so focused on material goods, on prosperity, on wealth? Don't they know that you can't take it with you, that all of it is temporary? Oh, those poor misguided people, we tell ourselves – without stopping to think of ourselves as being trapped in the same materialism and greed. Oh, we may not need to build larger barns, but we're doing our best to fill up the barns that we have – to acquire more and hold on to it. We tell ourselves that holding on to what we have – laying claim to all that we are entitled to – is important. Yet greed is greed, whether the stakes are ten dollars or ten million dollars – and, like most modern Americans, we are products of our consumer society, we are just as greedy and just as materialistic as anyone else. It is very difficult to live a life detached from material things – and it is only possible if we stay focused on what is important, on who is important. Yes, these readings encourage us to leave behind rampant consumerism and to spend our time building sand castles.

That's right. We should spend more time building sand castles, or tossing a baseball, or playing checkers or baking cookies. We should spend more time as did that young family on the beach – working together, enjoying one another's company, building memories that will last long after the game has been put away, long after the ocean has reclaimed the sand castle. In the years to come, those children won't remember the dimensions or the layout of that sand castle – but they'll remember that trip to the beach, the time they spent with dad and mom, the lessons of cooperation that they learned and the sense of accomplishment that they felt. We should spend time building relationships – with one another and, most importantly, with God. The created world will perish in ten minutes or ten years or ten decades or ten millennia – but it will perish – only God will last. If we are among those whom Qoheleth is describing – those who labor under the sun in anxiety of heart, those whose occupation is sorrow and grief – if that is who we are, then we are wasting our lives – all is, indeed, vanity. But if we labor with hearts filled with love, if our occupation is as a faithful disciple of the Lord – living out our vocation to the praise and glory of God – then we will indeed be rich in what matters to God.