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There are some things that can really kill the party. For example, walking in to a crowded room and announcing that you have had some sort of super-contagious skin rash for a long time. Or, walking in and announcing that you just “found” Jesus. Or, walking in and saying *anything* about the President. These things always kill the mood.

Things that also kill the mood are replying that you are a pastor when someone asks you what you do for a living. Within 90 seconds, they will get up and leave, I promise you that. Another thing that kills the mood is a pessimistic person, like the author of the book of Ecclesiastes...he was known only by the title The Teacher, and he was a real downer. Walking into a festive room, he is the one who says, “What difference does any of this *really* make? We’re all gonna die anyway.” And the music stops and

peoples' chins quiver and they begin to weep, and at that point, the party's over.

That's pretty much what the book of Ecclesiastes is all about....*what's the point of it all?*...is the overriding question in this book...*everything we do is like chasing after wind...everything we do is rooted in vanity...and we're all gonna die, anyway, so what difference does it make?*

Usually I am a pretty glass-half-full person. Usually I see the good in a situation, and in people. Usually I am optimistic, which in reality means I am disappointed a lot, in situations, in people. But my nature is to at least to try to be positive, and I think that describes most people in this room. Most of the time, we try to be upbeat about lives, our jobs, our families, our faith and everything else. Most of the time.

Sometimes, however, the bottom falls out of life, and not only is the glass half-empty, but the glass is smashed into a million pieces on the floor

and the water is spilled everywhere and the dog has walked on the glass and is now bleeding on the floor and the kids have slipped on the water and have fallen and now need to be rushed to the emergency room. Thankfully, these times don't happen often. But they do happen.

Sometimes, Ecclesiastes is a good book to read. Because The Teacher co-miserates with you. The Teacher empathizes with you in your despair.

The Teacher doesn't try to pick you up off the floor, he gets right down next to you and whispers in your life, "Life really does stink sometimes, doesn't it?...Oh, and by the way, one day, you're gonna die, too."

Sometimes we all look around at the things we've accomplished and achieved and we wonder to ourselves, "Does any of this stuff *really* matter at all?" Jesus addresses this in the Gospel when two brothers come to him and ask him to settle their fight over their father's inheritance, and Jesus says, "Forget it! I'm not getting in the middle of *that*!" It's the only time

Jesus says this in the Bible—two brothers fighting over their father’s land...*forget it, figure it out on your own*, he says, because he knows what land can do to people...what it can bring out in people...

...but not just land...money does this, too...or houses or cars or furniture or tractors or academic degrees or savings accounts or retirement funds or vacation homes or great big huge TVs and the list goes on and on...Jesus doesn’t have a problem with stuff or money, per se, as long as we share it with others. What he has a problem with is the greed it brings out in us. Stuff isn’t bad in and of itself, it’s what the stuff does to us that’s the problem.

An example. The other day, I bought a child a bag of candies.

I asked the child, “Could I please have one of those candies?”

The child firmly answered, “No way.”

I said, “Please?”

The child answered, “No way. They’re mine.”

I replied, “But I used my own money to buy them for you.”

“Yes, I know,” he answered, “but now they’re mine.”

The remainder of the conversation is not for public disclosure.

The greed is the problem. It’s what consumes us. It’s what divides us.

It’s what wars are fought over, it’s what pits brother against brother, it’s what turns an otherwise beautiful face into an ugly one, with a set jaw and burning eyes...*no, it’s mine*, we grown-ups say...maybe we’re just no better than toddlers who drive cars and vote.

While the author of Ecclesiastes might not be much fun, maybe he is right. The greed and resulting division that stuff causes the human race truly is something to lament. It leads us to believe that the ones with a lot of stuff must be favored by God, therefore God showers them with blessings, therefore they will surely go to heaven; whereas, that other person who has

nothing but a shopping cart full of rags and a park bench to sleep on must be of lesser value, therefore must be favored less by God, therefore surely will not go in heaven. We conclude that heaven is for the blessed. Hell is for the cursed.

Some pastors and theologians disagree with this, one in particular who is a Roman Catholic priest from Spain named Raimon Panikkar...who traveled to India and noticed with horror the stark contrast between the rich and the untouchable castes, human beings eating out of the trash heaps in the streets. He wrote over 40 books about the Christian faith, thinking all the while of these people eating out of piles of garbage in the streets of Calcutta...the ones who have nothing are just as precious in the sight of God as the ones who possess everything...the ones covered in sores and disease are just as beautiful in the eyes of God as the bathed and fragrant ones...God

sent his son Jesus to either bring all of them home, or none of them.

Salvation is an all-or-nothing deal.

Think of salvation like a fishing net...if there is a hole in the net, some fish will get away...but God's net of salvation has no hole in it. Jesus came to the world to draw all people unto himself, as he says in the book of John. Life isn't about the stuff; it's about the relationships. And resurrection isn't about the stuff, it's about the relationships, the fact that we are all somehow intertwined with each other, the same molecules are recycled throughout the universe, the same oxygen is eventually inhaled by all, the same solar energy sustains the planet upon which we all depend...and if one or one thousand or one million are cast eternally into hell, then there is a hole in the fishing net, and if there's a hole in the net, it is not perfect or complete, and the Bible promises us that restored creation will be perfect and complete. Jesus says, "I've come to draw all people unto myself." He

does not say, “I’ve come to draw unto myself only people with a lot of stuff.”

Maybe you already know all of this. After all, we all know how the ancient Egyptians stuffed their mummies’ tombs full of treasures to take with them into the afterlife. That’s the stuff that fills our museums. The stuff doesn’t matter, because we all know it will not join us in heaven. But our neighbor will. And so will our enemy. The reign of God is not about stuff, it’s about the complete relationship of humankind, with each other and ultimately with God. Jesus’ resurrection—and ours—is, then, not about things or money or land, it’s about his infinite love that draws all people to his cross. The reign of God is about leaving stuff behind, not about leaving people behind.