

Living Icons

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Psalm 49:1-11

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

Do any of you have any icons in your homes? Protestants have rather mixed feelings about icons. The word icon means a “sacred image”. They are meant to be beautifully mystical, ornate, made with precious metals mixed in the paint itself. They are created by artists through prayer and fasting before and during their creation. One does not paint an icon; artists “write” an icon. They are said to write icons because icons are designed to convey divine truth rather than be mere works of an artist’s imagination. The icons themselves are meant to speak. Christians throughout history have gazed at icons as a form of prayer and been drawn beyond the veil. Our early church fathers called icons “windows into heaven” and a “word for the illiterate” because icons preached the gospel to those who could not read and did not understand the Latin of the mass. Icons, therefore, are considered theological proclamations.

Now before we start making connections between icons and today’s texts, can we just collectively admit that our readings are super uncomfortable? We have what appears to be Jesus telling us to get rid of our 401ks, the Psalmist reminding us that we are all going to die, Solomon preaching that nothing we accumulate in this life is secure, and Paul telling us we already have died. Fun. Anyone else want to preach today? No? Well, pray for me then!

Today’s readings, while they cover a lot of territory, do have one significant thing in common. They all ask us to consider the things that matter most in this life. As challenging as the words are to hear, they invite us to question our principles and practices. They give us an eternal foil by which to measure the values behind our priorities.

If you are wondering what icons have to do with all these texts, let us consult Paul. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul provides a long list of egregious sins that he calls earthly. That term illustrates a visual image of those who engage in these activities as having their feet rooted in the soil of the land. Imagine roots from the earth entangling our bodies deeply in the ground so those engaged in these practices are literally tied to the earth. And as with all earthly things, these pursuits are destined to decay and all that is sought and valued will eventually blow away. Paul contrasts this with what he calls the “New Self”, which is “renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.” This renewal, this uprooting of old values and practices is done to fashion oneself into Christ’s “image.” The word image is the Greek word for icon. Paul is inviting us to become icons of Christ, living words for those who have no Christian literacy, living windows into heaven.

To become icons, according to Paul, we must first be renewed in our knowledge. Paul knows what it is like to live in this world. Much has changed in two thousand years, but the pull of natural impulses is timeless. Paul’s lists of wrath-inspiring behaviors are long, but each item shares a common root. They all stem from selfishness. They center **our** human desires, **our** will, **our** pursuits. The first list ends with greed, which he calls idolatry, because anything we passionately desire that serves **our** pursuits rather than God’s Kingdom, stands in opposition to God’s purposes through us. It makes us the god of our own world, idols. The second list is all about the way we directly treat others, our attitude and language. Interestingly, he immediately transitions from denouncing our abusiveness towards one another into dissolving the ranking systems humans use to gauge those against whom we believe it is permissible to abuse. Paul understands that our natural impulse is to climb social and financial ladders, so we can feel safe in our elevation over one another. It’s ugly to say out loud, but it is and always has been the earthly way of ordering human society. Paul destroys it. In God’s Kingdom, there is no idolatry of human desire over the will of God and no elevation of one human person as more valuable than another: no slave, no foreigner. For us to be icons in this world, we must view **our** priorities

as subordinate to our creator's intent. And we must elevate ALL "others" as equal **with us**. Christ's work is towards the fulfilment of God's Kingdom in which Christ's very presence, is all and IN ALL.

This morning's other teachers all take this a step further by specifically talking about our wealth. These texts are brutal in naming our treasures, our possessions, and even the legacies of our inheritance and the things passed down to us that we intend to pass down to our own children. These are not things we typically talk about, they make us feel awkward, uncomfortable, and even threatened. But an honest look at these ancient words, if we are willing to consider them, provide a bridge into the comfort and hope we all seek.

Solomon uses the word "vanity" to describe the way he feels about his life's pursuits. The primary goal of Solomon's life was to attain wisdom. In that endeavor, he explored everything from human work, toil, labor, and strain, everything a human life and effort can strive to produce and gain, to the point of mental and physical exhaustion. He found that, in the end, it is all vanity. That word basically means a puff of smoke. Everything we do grasping at the future is like chasing the wind. That **can** feel hopeless. But perhaps Jesus' explanation can offer some insight. He says that one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Possessions are things we can hold onto. The definition of vanity means something that cannot be held. So, perhaps the reason Solomon, and we, find ourselves exhausted so much of the time is because we are trying so hard to do something that is impossible to do. Perhaps it is not something we are meant to do. According to Jesus, our life, remember this Zoe, our vitality, our energy and our joy; our life is in the **living of it**, not the holding onto it.

Jesus tells us to be rich towards God. Remember, the reason greed is considered evil is because it centers **us** rather than the priorities of our creator. As humans, we can get those things confused if we're not careful. We are masters at making our priorities sound

like God's without ever actually consulting God. The opposite of greed is generosity. So, Paul tells us to seek the things that are above. Here's the trick of it. When Paul says this, he doesn't literally mean look at the sky, he means to look beyond the veil, look to the priorities that exist beyond what we can see and measure with human values. He provides a juxtaposition between treasures that can be seen and those that cannot. The things we can see and feel good about cataloguing in this life are mere vapors. One day what is real, what exists beyond just what **we** can measure and hold here, will be clearly seen. A life of meaning, that does not feel like ungraspable smoke, is one that is lived through faith for the benefit of others.

I don't know what to tell any of us about our savings accounts, for that we must continue to seek God's wisdom. We do know that with the most recent USAID cuts, an additional 14 million people are expected to die over the next four years from lack of resources. We do know that cuts to social services are restricting access to food and health care for those in our own communities. We may not see ourselves as financially wealthy in this life, but as middle-class Americans, most of us measure our excess against our comfort rather than our hunger. Jesus cautions us against storing up treasures that cannot be held, to instead be rich towards God, and warns us that greed is sneaky, so we need God's help to see it in ourselves.

Being renewed, according to Paul, is an ongoing endeavor. We must continue to be renewed as we discern how best to become icons of Christ in this world. What can be said clearly is that to become this new self, we must take on a new orientation. Everything we do in this life ought to be done for and with God. According to Jesus, our genuine treasures are not seen or clutched, they cannot be lost, stolen, or corrupted. If we are listening, Jesus' words will make all of us feel uncomfortable. But, if we are living by the metrics of God's kingdom, today's texts will also feel comforting. Our hope is in God, our provider, who cares for us as we care for others.

May our confidence in God form to be a people who live as icons, offering others a window to see beyond this world and into Christ.