

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 1, 2010

The Rev. Nathan LeRud

Charissa Simmons, who is our Coordinator for Family Ministries here at Trinity, forwarded me an article this week that was written by Daniel Simmons, who is an Episcopal priest who serves at Trinity Wall Street in New York City. Every year Daniel Simmons attends *Burning Man* which is a festival of counter culture and crazy performance arts, and what we might call radical self-expression that happens in the desert of Nevada every year and after reading his article I kinda want to go (laughter) but part of what they do at *Burning Man* is create a temple in the desert. It's an open space where people bring their deepest selves and they build this temple out of the physical stuff of their lives, out of mementoes and pictures and relics of lost loves and strange relationships; people write on it, they do graffiti, they leave notes. It becomes this kind of an amazing art installation there in the deserts of Nevada and at the end of the week they set the temple on fire and the whole crowd stands there in silence watching it burn. And Daniel Simmons describes what happens there as a kind of liturgy and the power that this liturgy has to reach people who have been turned off by traditional religions. He writes "Very few people at *Burning Man* would call themselves 'religious'; most have fled the churches because of what they perceive as a toxic blend of hypocrisy and absence of soul, but", he writes "they have not fled meaning. Watching their hunger and engagement assures me that the human soul is still adept at expressing its awareness of the Divine. Rob it of one language and it will quickly create another, but not always healthily." He goes on to write "the language of war and of nationalism, victimization is religious language." And I would suggest along with Simmons that the language of "stuff" – right? iPads and smart phones and shoes and entertainment systems and toilet paper and towels and tea kettles. I would suggest that all of that is a kind of religious language; that our stuff has the power to make us happy. It's a different grammar, maybe, part of a different language from making meaning, a different way of experiencing religion, but nevertheless our stuff does represent a kind of religion; a way of making meaning, making connections between the exterior world and the interior world and in a way it has become incredibly powerful and incredibly pervasive. At the end of last season on "Mad Men", which is a show on AMC, the brilliant advertizing executive, Don Draper, is trying to get his savvy

young protégée, Peggy Olsen to come with him as he starts a new firm and she's a little hesitant and so to woo her, Don says "Peggy, there are people out there who buy things, people like you and me and something happened, something terrible, and the way that they saw themselves is gone and nobody understands that, but you do and that's very valuable, because Peggy, like Don, knows how to sell lipstick and floor wax and swimsuits and cars, not by talking about what they do but by tapping into that deep place of insecurity and hopelessness, that need to know who we are what our life means, this religious need we carry around with us. Peggy and Don are able to tap into that place and sell things; they know how to do it because they are in touch with that place in their own lives – what that feels like. Peggy and Don in a way are priests who turn their own broken places into the means of offering healing or the promise of healing to people who are in desperate need of healing. That's why they're good at their job, they know how to sell stuff, they know how to offer the promise of connection through stuff and the self-identity or the happiness that stuff offers. It is a religious language that they work with. And if that sounds a little bit dangerous to you, you are not alone. Religions both sacred and secular are dangerous and it would be easy to take today's readings, this powerful wakeup call from Ecclesiastes "vanity of vanities, all is vanity" on the one hand and Jesus' parable of the rich man on the other hand. It would be easy for me to stand up here and rail against the evils of materialism and greed, the tragic sin that affects the rich man when he convinces himself that he can buy happiness – right – that accumulation of stuff is going to secure his future, but we've all heard that sermon before I suspect or something kind of like it and it hasn't inoculated us against the power that stuff has over us. The power that it has to make us happy and even more fundamentally with that raw place of anxiety and fear and need that the world of advertizing and marketing can speak to with varying degrees of subtlety and success. We know that we live in an unbelievably affluent and materialistic culture, probably the most stuff entangled culture that the world has seen. We know all of that and we know that in our scriptures there are voices that suggest a different way but the deep chasm – the gulf between the world that we live in and the Kingdom of God that Jesus talks about remains for many of us seemingly impossible to bridge. It's not always material goods that get in the way of that. Some of us practice a religion of accumulation through acquiring friends and relationships or advanced degrees – right -- academic study, or travel. Whether it's accumulating stuff or accumulating experiences, accumulating people, we are caught. The religion of accumulation got to us before anything else could. It is our first language. It's

deeply, deeply embedded in us, this impulse to stave off fear and anxiety through accumulating stuff. Talk about sin and salvation – right – that’s what I wanna be saved from. My inability to get out of that language – this religion of ownership that claims me. I can’t do that on my own. So the issue for me is not money and greed -- it’s stuff and the power that ownership has over us. So let’s not underestimate that power or dismiss it through platitudes – greed is bad, you can’t buy love, the love of money is the root of all evil – right – all of that is true, but I don’t think it’s helpful, because what I want to say to that preacher preaching that sermon – do get an iPad -- like it’s pretty cool and it might actually make you happy (laughter) I mean just for an instance – right? – and here’s the thing, whole hearted enjoyment of the iPad is one possible legitimate answer, one Biblical answer to the problem of stuff; it’s interesting in our Lectionary pairing of Ecclesiastes – vanity of vanities – it’s all vanity -- with Jesus’ parable of the rich man because as I read it the message of Ecclesiastes is that it’s all actually vanities, right – both the religion of stuff, the quest of happiness from things and the religion of wisdom, the quest for – the meaning of life – right -- ultimate truth -- both are about accumulation and ownership. Both quests come out of our need to own something. As a side bar, Ecclesiastes is very short; it’s about twelve chapters long and if you’ve got some extra this afternoon or later this week, I encourage you to just pick it up and read it because it speaks with a voice that can surprise us I think with its honesty and its directness. If you’ve never read Ecclesiastes, you owe yourself to take a look at it. The writer of Ecclesiastes is called “the teacher” or koheleth in Hebrew – and Martin Luther translates that term as *die lehrer* – the teacher and Eugene Patterson in what I think is maybe the best translation/paraphrase of Ecclesiastes calls him the “quester” – the quester identifies himself as the Son of David, King of Jerusalem; he’s traditionally identified with King Solomon. He talks about how he spent his whole life trying to figure out what it’s all about. He says “Oh I did great things; I built houses, I planted vineyards, I designed gardens and parks, I bought male and female slaves, I acquired huge flocks and herds, I piled up silver and gold, I gathered a chorus of singers, entertained me with song, most exquisite of all pleasures, I acquired voluptuous maidens for my bed and then” he says “I took a good look at all of the sweat and the hard work and what I saw when I looked was nothing but vanity, nothing but smoke, smoke and spitting into the wind.” And then he turns to wisdom; he looks at judgment, and righteousness, the violence that takes place in the world, the plight of the poor; he says “I tested everything in my search for wisdom; I set out to be wise and it was beyond me – far beyond me. I

concentrated with all my might, studying, and exploring and seeking wisdom, the meaning of life, I wanted to identify evil and stupidity, foolishness and craziness, but the wisdom that I looked for I have not found. Vanity of vanities, right, he goes through all of it; the chase after stuff, the chase after wisdom and knowledge, what he comes down to is this: "it's one faith for everybody", he says, "righteous and wicked, good people, bad people, the nice and the nasty, worshipers and non-worshipers, the committed, the uncommitted, everyone is lumped together into one fate. Is it any wonder" the writer says, "that so many people are obsessed with evil? Is it any wonder that people go crazy, right and left? Life leads up to death and that's it." According to the quester you can store up material goods or you can store up spiritual goods, neither path is going to get you anywhere in the end. So the answer the quester come to is "seize life" – that's what he says "seize life", eat bread with gusto, drink wine with robust heart, dress festively every morning, don't skimp on colors and scarves; relish life with the spouse that you love each and every day of your precarious life. By this view, there's nothing wrong with finding happiness in a tea kettle or an iPad, even if the happiness is ephemeral, it's all ephemeral, so find happiness where you can, according to the quester, he says: "don't knock yourself out being good. Don't go overboard being wise. Don't press your luck by being bad either. Don't be reckless, it's best", he says "to stay in touch with both sides of an issue. A person who fears God deals responsibly with all of reality, not just a piece of it". And so Jesus said at the end of today's parable of the rich man who accumulates things only to die suddenly – "so it will be for those who store treasures for themselves and are not rich toward God". Those treasures can be material, which is how we usually read this parable, or they can be spiritual. Storing up spiritual treasures, right? Accumulating them for the sake of owning them – holding on to them, having them is a dead end trail. And that's not so different from what the quester has to say. At the end of his search for wisdom and understanding it leads him down a rabbit hole and it does for all of us and in the end he learns that all the wisdom that he accumulated was just spitting into the wind. He does learn this much: "A person who fears God deals responsibility with all of reality, not just a piece of it. My friends, I think that's what it means to search for the Kingdom of God, to know that we will never find it in the way that we want to, in a way that we can wrap it up and take it home with us. The Kingdom of God is a treasure and accumulating treasures on earth is empty, we know that; knowing that does not save us from the irresistible pull of the religion of stuff, so shucking it all and joining a monastery actually doesn't get us that far because we're likely to find

ourselves in the exact same place, storing up a different kind of treasure that won't get us any closer to the Kingdom of God. There's a gulf there and if we think that we can cross it by our own efforts we're dangerously mistaken. The religion of stuff is too pernicious and too deeply embedded in us. So what we're offered is not more stuff to accumulate; we're not offered a platitude, we're offered a person, not a set of aphorisms, not dogma or teaching, not pearls of wisdom that we can ford away for a rainy day, not words to live by; storing up wisdom is no different than storing up iPads. Both words and things have the power to make us happy, but they do not have the power to set us free. And so God offers us a person in place of words and things – a presence, something that we cannot own, something real, something flesh and blood, a person who is fully human, someone who is able to represent for us – as the quester says – all of life, all of what it means to be human, not just the pretty part, somebody who knows the dicey situation we find ourselves in and that reaches out his hand and says: “here, come with me, there's a way out of this and the answer has to do with love, but if you start getting caught up in aphorisms and wisdom to guide you, you're just gonna get lost again, don't try so hard; trust more, don't beat yourself up, just be honest with other people and with yourself; you can even enjoy your iPad if you want, because there are good things in life and it's OK to be happy about them – have a glass of wine with dinner and search after wisdom, but don't think that you can find meaning through ownership of things or ownership of ideas or ownership of people any more than you can meaning through ownership of things; that's a hard one for us, but maybe part of the solution is to pile it all up like they do at *Burning Man*, right – to come to terms with what it actually is for us to make a temple out of all of the stuff that we carry around – the physical stuff, the spiritual stuff; write it all down, you know claim it, build a building out of it if it comes to be that literally. Come to terms with the fact that the religion of holding on to stuff is the religion in which many of us functionally worship and then when we have this actual temple before us, we set fire to it and everything we think we know, everything we think we own, everything that we hang on to so tenaciously because it's what we think we have, it's who we think we are, we let it go and we watch it burn and we see that it is all smoke and then it that dry and barren place, in that long silence we start looking around. Maybe we'd stop talking so much and we'd really see each other for the first time, not as objects to be accumulated or to hang on to but who we really are, right – the people of God, people that God loves, the people who have the ability to be for each other the

presence of Jesus if only we can be set free and trust the One who loves us,
maybe we can catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Amen