

*July 31, 2022; Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA*

Vanity of vanities! All is vanity! I have worked and worked and for what? I will die long before the seeds I have planted have come to fruit—and who knows if those who come next will even care? Vanity...

Boy that guy must have been fun at parties, huh?  
“Next time, let’s not invite that ‘vanities’ guy, okay?”

Money is a very strange thing indeed. All by itself, it is worthless. You can’t eat it. You can’t wear it. And it can never ever love you. Vanity of vanities, indeed. But of course, it seems almost silly to point out that there is quite a bit more to the story. Money is the way we measure and determine, the way we capture value. It is the most powerful symbol in our world. “Money becomes ‘frozen desire’,” a favorite writer of mine wrote, “not desire for anything in particular, but a symbol for the satisfaction of desire in general.”<sup>1</sup> Money is the way we satisfy our desire to satisfy our desires.

Now, I’m not going to stand up here and encourage vows of poverty. I buy a powerball ticket from time to time, and am sure I’ve chosen the right numbers this time, and begin making mental plans for my windfall. But it does seem impossible to ignore the fact that there seems to be a cliff coming into view on the horizon.

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<sup>1</sup> David Loy, *Ecodharma*.

We are in a time of great transition and aren't quite sure how to navigate it. On the one hand, our technological improvements have led to the creation of vast sums of wealth. As a society—and this is increasingly true globally—we have become fabulously wealthy. But on the other hand, we have been slowly becoming aware that the structures of our societies have funneled too much of this wealth into too few hands. And as our technologies continue to improve, we're going to have to find new ways to share the wealth that results.

That's one way to tell the story—a story of money: we've made lots of it but haven't spread it around very well. But there's another way, too. And that's a story about value, about who we value why, about what we value and why. The story of the man who pulled down his barns to build bigger ones, is a story of money, sure, and maybe of greed. But it's also a story of meaning and identity, of who the man thought he was or what he thought he wanted to be. When we learn that our value comes from what we can accumulate, we can easily adopt that mindset—that the one's with the biggest barns are the best people—most important, hardest working, most deserving, most moral. But that's not a story about money alone. It's also a story about accumulating status or prestige. And sometimes it's even about accumulating all the right enemies or political opinions, and finding our value in how right we are and how wrong somebody else is. However we frame it, this is an easy lesson to learn from the world without even realizing it. And without even realizing it, we find ourselves living on a ladder, a hierarchy of who has

and has not, of who is important and who is not. And too easily we find ourselves admiring those with more, thinking more highly of those with more, of wanting more for ourselves, and believe that those have less deserve less. Look at how much bigger all my storehouses are now. Paul's language to the Colossians might give us the impression that we would do well to turn our attention away from this world entirely—a pox on all your storehouses!—or that the real meaning isn't here but found in whatever comes next. "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." But all the rest of his advice is all about how we are to think of ourselves and one another, here and now. "Put away the things you have learned from the world," he tells them, "anger and enmity, strife and rivalry—and embrace instead what we have seen in the Christ."

United to God, Jesus doesn't seek after the same sorts of things we learn to seek. His identity, his sense of meaning, comes from being united to the one that is Eternal Love. And so, yes, he isn't tempted to gather material possessions to himself—he doesn't build any barns whatsoever! But neither is tempted to gather those other things that build an identity. Instead, he lives from a deep knowledge—a faith—that he is inseparable from the One Who Loves Him.

What was been revealed in this one, Paul writes, is a new way of being, a new way of seeing, of valuing ourselves and others. "You have been clothed in a new self," he writes, "and this new self, this new identity, doesn't come

from the same places. It comes instead from the one who came to us.”

In our baptisms, we are united to the One who speaks this word to us and give us this new identity: You are a child of God and in you the Holy Loving One takes delight. There isn't anything we've ever done to earn this word and there isn't anything we can ever do to lose this word. It is given to us simply because it is God's good pleasure to name us beloved. And hearing this, over and over again, we are brought into a new system of values, one that doesn't lift up the more and the bigger over the less and the smaller, but one that looks on those whom the world names as first and those whom the world names as last and sees only fellow children of God.

With this cross on our forehead, with this name child of God, we are free to adopt a different set of values, one that doesn't see our worth or others' worth in the size of barns. We are free instead to accumulate the good things that God desire for us: to grow in love and mercy, compassion and generosity. And when we do that, when we shed this “earthly” set of values and work to adopt “these things that are above,” we join Christ in that mission to bring the Reign of God to our here and now. When we meet others, not as the world says they are but as God says they are, we speak the word that we ourselves have heard: You are a child of God, loved by the One who made you.

Here, we are reminded and we remind one another of who we really are. We hear and we say that we are children of God and that nothing anywhere can change that. And we go into the world to live from this truth, to live seeing others as Beloved children of God. Amen.