

A Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm
Saint Mark PC
August 16, 2020

In the summer months in downtown Pittsburgh, there is a long running Arts Festival, called the Three Rivers Arts Festival, artists and craftspeople from all over the world come to exhibit in a beautiful setting by the rivers and the park.

One year, an artist captured the attention of a lot of festival goers. His art involved drawing pictures on the sidewalk with chalk pastels. The crowd would gather and he would ask for a request, then draw whatever people requested on the sidewalk. He drew portraits of people, rolling hills and mountain scene, anything they asked for.

What was interesting though was as the festival went on, people had to walk on his creations. And just like here, Pittsburgh in the summertime the inevitable thunderstorm and torrential rain would roll through, and wash away the chalk and his art was gone forever.

A reporter from the Post-Gazette asked the artist "Why do you draw with chalk on the sidewalk? Why not make your art more permanent?"

His answer was, "My art is for the moment. There is nothing that lasts in life. There is nothing that is permanent. So I might as well draw with chalk on the sidewalk."

Maybe that is something we have all thought at one time or another. Is life like chalk on a sidewalk? Is everything fleeting or temporary, or is there something that lasts?

These are also questions asked in the ancient book of Wisdom we heard Jocelyn read today. The book of

Ecclesiastes is identified in the first chapter as relating to Solomon, son of King David, who was known for having it all = wealth, power, prosperity. He was King during the height of Israel's glory, there was peace and prosperity and Solomon was known for pursuing any pleasure he desired.

He had the Temple built, the finest food and wine and clothing known at the time.

Remember Jesus would later comment - "Look at the lilies of the field - even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." (Matthew 6:28-29)

So as a kind of a cautionary tale -the book of Ecclesiastes is his reaction to having it all. Listen to the disappointing conclusion for him:
"All is vanity and a striving after wind. There is nothing to be gained under the sun."

If we were sitting together and talking we could come up with lots of names of wealthy or famous people of our age who seemed to have it all, only to suffer this hollow feeling which seemed to afflict Solomon.

What about the life that we are called to live? Is there anything to be gained under the sun?

Well maybe the flaw in this philosophy is looking only at the material realm. Only looking "under the sun".

Perhaps Solomon and others are telling us that we look for happiness under the sun, only in earthly things and material wealth. Those things can bring us comfort and a sense of well being, we know that.

But we also know as people of faith that there is another dimension of life.

If you would permit a simplistic analogy, if you think of the material realm like a horizontal dimension, then the vertical realm is our connection with God through Christ. Paul says it is in the intersection of the horizontal and the vertical when we find lasting meaning in life.

In other words when you make the connection with the living God, when your life intersects with the vertical - the divine dimension, it takes on an eternal perspective. It is in that perspective that life becomes more than chalk on the sidewalk.

Paul says this in that one verse from 1 Corinthians: Be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord because in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

There is something permanent perhaps even eternal about the work we do in God.

Maybe there is someone in your life who has helped you in the work of the Lord as Paul says it. And in turn you are leaving a lasting imprint on another's work in the Lord.

I don't mean chalk on a sidewalk, I mean from the eternal vertical perspective. In God our labor is not in vain.

If you allow God to intersect your life, things will last that have eternal meaning. Everything you do counts for eternity.

I had experience with this in my first called Pastorate in Palmetto, Florida. The church some time before had a pastor named Knight Thompson who was there for 25 years. I learned that he and a group of others loved and valued Education - his son became a history teacher - and so in 1958 they got a plan together and started to raise funds for a Presbyterian College on the west coast of Florida.

Their efforts succeeded and in 1960, Florida Presbyterian College was started and that church in Palmetto I served was recognized as a Founding Congregation of that school in St. Petersburg FL. It has a beautiful campus, along several miles of Tampa Bay and an outdoor oriented campus. It is now known as Eckerd College.

That relatively small beginning was not in vain. It made a difference. Members of Palmetto Presbyterian were among the first graduating class. Eckerd has some terrific programs and works with the national PC(USA) on conferences, in normal times.

And one other thing - our daughter went there and graduated in 2012.

So I reflect on the work of Knight Thompson. Was his labor in vain? Was that just chalk on the sidewalk? From an eternal perspective, absolutely not.

I wonder how we can think of that kind of work here at Saint Mark today? We are about to embark on a new phase of this transition period, which we will talk lots more about in the months to come, but we are also going to be called to believe that our life - our work - has some eternal significance.

We will be called I believe to lift our sights beyond this current pandemic crisis to envision our church in 10 or 20 years - someone may be impacted by your labor in the Lord - what you are doing this day or this year - your contributions your insight, your stewardship - someone may be impacted years down the road, like my daughter was at Eckerd College from the work of Knight Thompson.

Perhaps all is not vanity and a striving after the wind. But we surely live in a world where people will try to convince you that it is.

No, the contributions we make are imprinted in the souls and minds and hearts of people. The difference you make when you allow Christ to work through you will always be of value.

Therefore my beloved be steadfast, immovable excelling in the work of the Lord, knowing that in The Lord your labor is not in vain.

That is not just my word or my opinion. That is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.