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Eat, Drink and Find Enjoyment (Ecclesiastes 2:24-25)  
St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Irvine, CA  
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The text for this morning's sermon is Ecclesiastes 2:24-25: "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" (ESV). Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

This morning's Gospel reading—particularly the parable about the rich man who decided to build bigger barns to store his grains and goods—is a lesson about acting like God does not exist. After all, where does the rich man find his security? Where does he place his trust? In the big barns full of grain and goods, not in the God of heaven and earth who gives to all "their food in due season" (Psalm 104:27). And then the Old Testament reading, the words of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes—this is also a lesson about acting like God does not exist. After all, why does King Solomon hate all his toil in which he toiled under the sun? Why does he despair over the toil of his labors under the sun? Because it all seems meaningless if someone else gets to enjoy the fruits of his labor—or worse yet, to squander it like a fool. He looks for meaning in the outcome of his work, not in the God who gave him his body and soul, eyes, ears, and all his members and who richly and daily provides him with all that he needs to support this body and life. So, are you more like the rich man who wanted to build bigger barns, or are you more like the rich man who couldn't enjoy the fruits of his labor? Which way do you sin?

The book of Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon. He lived about 1,000 B.C. He was the son of the famous—or infamous—King David. Solomon inherited the throne from his father, and he expanded the nation and enriched it. Along the way, he gained everything a person

could want to be happy: first of all, wisdom—we are told that kings and queens came from around the then-known world to hear his wisdom; then wealth and power and women and status and peace. You name it, he had it. And yet, this guy who had it all found no meaning in it. “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Here is the rub—at least, as far as Ecclesiastes 1 and 2 are concerned: Solomon has all this wealth, and he can experience pretty much any pleasure he wants, and he can seek to understand the world with a wisdom far deeper than anyone else has, but it all seems pointless. Pleasure? It comes, and then it goes. Money? You spend it. Work? Well, you work hard and save wisely, and then you end up leaving the money to someone who could turn out to be a fool. If your heir wastes the inheritance, then all your work was pretty much pointless. Worse than that, you work and work and work, and instead of taking time to enjoy what you have, you die, and someone else gets to enjoy it. Again, all your work was pretty much pointless. “This is vanity and a great evil,” Solomon writes (Ecclesiastes 2:21).

The problem is, Solomon’s got it all wrong. Why work? Because God created “man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). Why clean your house when it’s just going to get dirty again? Because God has given you a house to live in, and a clean house is more enjoyable than a dirty one. Why plant flowers when they’re just going to die eventually? Because God has given you the ability to make the world more beautiful for yourself and for others around you. Why design computers that will just get outdated, teach students who may or may not study, give money to needy people who may or may not use it wisely? Because needy people need money to eat, and the outcome is up to them and God—not you. Because students need someone to instruct them and form them, and the outcome is up to them and God—not you. Because the computers you design now will be put to good use in hospitals and

businesses and individual homes, even if something faster and smaller comes along next week. We work because God calls us to work. We work because the people around us need us to work. When we fret and worry because it all seems pointless, then we are acting like God is not working in this world to bless us.

And this is true not only of the work we do, but of the fruits of our labor as well. We know not everyone is as well off as we here in Orange County are—even if we don't feel well off. Is it okay to enjoy a glass of wine on your back patio when there are people living in cardboard boxes in garbage dumps? Is it okay to buy your kids a new toy when there are children who have no toys to speak of, not to mention clean drinking water? Well, you could look at these goods you have and ask, "Isn't it vanity and a great evil for me to enjoy these things while other people starve?" That's a good question. And here's the answer: maybe, but maybe not.

Imagine for a moment that husband and wife are out window shopping. The wife sees a beautiful necklace. She points it out to her husband, and she remarks how it would go so well with a couple of her dresses, and he notices how it makes her eyes sparkle. Of course, it's expensive, and she thinks nothing of it after they walk away. But he—the husband—he decides to surprise her. He works a little overtime. He goes without his morning Starbucks a few days a week. And then, just before a classy, formal affair, he presents her with that necklace. She is stunned. She kisses him and thanks him and admires the necklace, and then she wraps the necklace case in an old sock and stores it away in her dresser drawer. "Well, I know not everyone can afford such a nice necklace, so I'm not going to wear it," she says to her husband.

Isn't that the way we treat God when we fret and worry rather than enjoying the good gifts he has given us? Certainly you don't deserve those gifts. You don't deserve a world that produces beautiful blossoms when you plant seeds. You've done too many ugly things in your

life to deserve that. You don't deserve a world in which you can enjoy the company of friends and family over a glass of wine. You've said too many unkind—even downright nasty—things to those people to deserve to enjoy their company, and maybe you've even abused the fruits of the earth by eating more than is healthy or drinking more than is prudent. Do you really believe that you deserve to find any satisfaction in your work, to find any enjoyment in this world? If so, then you are simply blind to the way in which your own worry and anxiety and frustration and fretting cause you to mistreat other people and misuse the fruits of the earth and offend the God who gave them to you in the first place.

And yet he gives them to you. “All this he does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy” (*Small Catechism*, Explanation to the First Article of the Creed). Or, in the words of King Solomon, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?” (Ecclesiastes 2:24-25). If you are wealthy, it is not because you deserve it. Other people have worked just as hard as you and ended up dirt poor. If you are wealthy, it is only because your gracious God saw fit to give his own Son into death for you and so continues to provide you with all you need and more—not because you're a believer, but because God loves each and every sinner so much that he “sends rain on the just and on the unjust” alike in hopes that all will come to faith in his Son, Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:45). Whatever you have is a gift of God's grace, given to you “without any merit or worthiness in” you (*Small Catechism*, Explanation to the First Article of the Creed). The only reason the earth continues to produce food and flowers, the only reason human beings continue to find any joy in work and life, is because forgives sinners for the sake of Jesus Christ. Were God not gracious and had Jesus not died for you, then your sins would never be forgiven, and God would have no

reason whatsoever to do anything for you. Yet he does everything. His Son Jesus Christ came and trusted him completely, without any worrying or fretting or anxiety. And through faith, you now get credit for that righteous behavior. Jesus Christ gave his life on the cross for you, and through faith you are counted innocent in God's eyes. The gifts God gives us, he gives us to enjoy—and that is not just the gift of salvation, but the gift of work and physical goods as well.

And yet, it's possible to enjoy these gifts in the wrong way. You can enjoy them as pure gifts from God, delivered out of his fatherly, divine goodness and mercy and intended to enrich your life and the lives of the people around you. That is good. What joy to share a glass of wine with family and friends, just as we will one day enjoy the company of God at the marriage feast of the Lamb which will have no end! What joy to help someone who is in need, just as our gracious Father helps us in our need! What joy to give a student a well-deserved A or a well-deserved C, because our heavenly Father has given you the privilege of teaching and forming young people.

But you can also enjoy these gifts as if they are what give your life its meaning. You can enjoy them—and covet them—as if God gave them to you as some kind of divine right intended for you and you alone quite apart from the needs of others. You can enjoy them as if these goods—and not the God who gives them—provide your security in this life, so that giving away anything would mean you are one step closer to running out. This is bad, and this is what our Savior warns against in the parable of the rich man. “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is

required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” (Luke 12:16-20). When you find your security in the gifts rather than the giver, when you depend on goods for your daily bread rather than God, then you are living as if God is not the gracious and merciful God that he is. Instead, you are living as if God does not provide—and at that point, you might as well not believe in him at all. You have made your wealth into your God, and while it may sustain you for an entire lifetime, it will let you down when Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead. Thinking that God’s good gifts will provide all you need to support this body and life is acting like there is no God. Enjoying those gifts while ignoring people who are suffering or in need is acting like you got those gifts on your own without God. Either way is wrong.

You see, God in Christ Jesus sets you free. Work, whether you’ll make lots or little at it, for “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32). In the forgiveness that Christ won on the cross for you, you have all you need for life in the world to come, and God will also give you all you need for life in this world as well. Give to those in need, and “and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). Finally, do not reject the gifts God has given you by worrying and fretting, for “there is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God” (Ecclesiastes 2:22). You are forgiven. You are free. And God has given you gifts to enjoy.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.