

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
November 8, 2020 Streaming Mass
32nd Sunday of Year A Wisdom 6:12-16, Mt 25:1-13

I am presently reading a book entitled "The Hidden Life of Trees." Who would have thought that trees had a hidden life? Nothing scandalous, but there is a lot more going on in the forest than we might have imagined. Scientists jokingly refer to a forest as a "wood wide web" because of the high degree of communication going on between the trees. In fact, it takes a forest to create a microclimate suitable for tree growth and sustenance, so much so that an isolated tree has a far shorter life than trees that live connected together in the forest. Just one example is the manner by which trees communicate to each other by scent. For example, on the African savannah when giraffes start feeding off the umbrella acacias, the trees immediately start pumping toxic substances into their leaves to rid themselves of the giraffes. At the same time they start emitting a warning gas signaling nearby trees of the same species that a crisis is at hand. Immediately all the forewarned trees start pumping the same toxins into their leaves to prepare themselves for any approaching giraffes. Over time the giraffes have gotten wise to what's going on, so they move to a far part of the savannah that the scent has not reached, or they go upwind. Underground the situation is much the same: a fungal network weaves in and out around the roots of trees throughout the forest facilitating the exchange of nutrients between them.

I mention this because Pope Francis in his recent encyclical (letter to the world), *Fratelli Tutti* (Brothers All), develops this same theme of the interconnectivity of all of nature. He takes the title of the encyclical from St. Francis of Assisi who spoke of Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Sister Water and Mother Earth. Pope Francis writes, "The Spirit, infinite bond of love, is infinitely present at the very heart of the universe, inspiring and bringing new pathways." It is, as if, the Holy Trinity, Three Persons in One God, is etched as a template in all creation. The Holy Father finds the pattern of connectivity in creation as one that should be replicated among human beings. Again, he writes, "Creatures tend toward God and in turn it is proper to every human being to tend towards other things, so that throughout the universe we can find any number of constant and secretly interwoven relationships...The human person grows more, matures more, and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves in communion with God, with others, and with all creatures."

In short, because we are all related, coming from the same source, we owe every creature respect and should approach each thing or person with reverence. Each

piece of creation affects, depends upon, and participates in the life of the others. So, we choose to place limits on our self-centered wills, our desires, and our pleasures. Why? Because it means our lives are not just about ourselves, but about the human family, about the created world to which we belong. We care about, we care for the world God has given us.

This is a vision of life embraced by the person who possesses the wisdom spoken of in today's first reading, a wisdom that demands an encounter with reality. Instead, too often we prefer to live in our own little bubble of consumer preferences and like-minded acquaintances, excluding "all that we cannot control or know instantly and superficially." This process "blocks the kind of serene reflection that could lead to a shared wisdom." So, what are we left with? Pope Francis goes on to say how "we fed ourselves on dreams of splendor and grandeur, and ended up consuming distraction, insularity and solitude. We gorged ourselves on networking, and lost the sense of fraternity. We looked for quick and safe results, only to find ourselves overwhelmed by impatience and anxiety. Prisoners of a virtual reality, we lost the taste and flavor of the truly real."

We have replaced *homo sapiens* with *homo economicus*. We have replaced the wise, intelligent human being with the economic one, motivated by self-interest, often at a cost to others. *Homo economicus* views all social relations as economic transactions, with market relations and all personal problems viewed as surmountable by consuming the right products and achieving a desired lifestyle, as advertised in celebrity culture. For this kind of individual, even deeply personal relationships are essentially negotiated consumer choices. Marriage, families, friendships, workplaces, schools, churches, and government are all sites of self-interested consumer calculations. Market talk and market metaphors abound in areas of society that were once considered purely personal. An example would be Jared Kushner's public proclamations that his wife Ivanka "is definitely the CEO of the household, whereas as [he is] more on the board of directors." The result is a society of radically autonomous, atomized individuals, disconnected from surrounding personal and civic associations. Every choice becomes an economic calculation, ranking consumer preferences on what "feels right." What makes sense is what's good for me, and for me alone. There is no appeal to the common good. Rather the whole point of society is to acquire the best "deal" possible for myself.

Pope Francis presents a vision of life radically at odds with the one that operates in our world today, a vision of interconnectivity opposed to one of fragmented individualism. A choice is offered to us. Like the wise virgins prepared to meet the bridegroom, we are asked to save our time, our energy, and our attention for what

truly matters--the personal, the human, the spiritual, rather than the economic, the financial, the material. If we have learned each day to extend ourselves to others in their need, to connect with them, instead of being wrapped up in ourselves, preoccupied with our own concerns, then we can be assured that on that final day we will be ready when the Bridegroom comes to greet us. In the words of the old Gospel hymn, "I wanna be ready on that day."