

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
July 26, 2020 Streaming Mass
17th Sunday of Year A Mt 13: 44-52

We've all had the experience of having lost something—a set of keys, a cell phone, an important check---and having spent a considerable amount of time looking for that lost object, all to no avail. Then, after having given up all hope of ever finding it, we turn around and there it is, right in front of us. Certainly you know the relief, the joy, the thrill of that moment. Those may be trivial examples, but there are other moments when we fall into what some would call just "good luck." It may be something we never earned or even thought we deserved, maybe something beyond all our expectations, maybe something that has no material value, but is of profound emotional, moral, spiritual worth. I would suggest those moments when we receive what we never worked for are among life's greatest blessings.

The most wonderful experiences of life aren't the things we can control or manage, but those that are simply there to be enjoyed, to take delight in, to savor. It is that part of life which comes to us as a gift with no strings attached. It might be the experience of falling in love, of being loved. I'm thinking of a young guy who saw a girl whom he thought was "totally out of his league," but he mustered up the courage to ask her out, they fell in love and had a wonderful life together. It might be the gift of old friends who've stood by you through thick and thin. It might be good health, or just a good night's sleep—things we can try to make sure we'll have, but which we soon come to realize are largely beyond our control. It might be the birth of a child (sure a couple can say, "we've made this baby", but did they really?). It might be the awareness that the mere fact I am alive is itself a gift, and that I am inextricably woven into this incredibly complex universe. It is any one of, and all of those moments in my life when I recognize that my feeble attempts to make things turn out my way, to be in control of my destiny, are such paltry efforts to ensure my well-being, in the face of blessings I have already received.

So, the attitude of the person who can see beyond his or her achievements to what they have received, is simply gratitude, thankfulness, appreciation, joy, en-joy-meant. It is in some sense to be grace-full, to be full of grace, to be aware and attentive to what has just fallen into one's lap. A grateful person is thereby preserved from that protective, possessive, clawing attitude characteristic of the individual who is more focused on having rather than on being, on achieving rather than receiving, on accumulating rather than savoring and enjoying. It is, as well, the capacity continually to be surprised, because the grateful, grace-full person has access to the greatest gift,

seeing what is at the heart of life itself. The grateful, grace-full person possesses the antidote for the drivenness that impels so many today, distracting them from the enjoyment of what they already have, before they rush off in the mad pursuit of more and more stuff. The grateful, grace-full person has the antidote for all forms of self-pity, the tendency to live by the narrow logic of comparison and envy, always noticing, always calculating what others have and they don't. The grateful, grace-full person is free, free to enjoy what he or she does have.

Gratitude for life's blessings is not something that can be commanded; it can only be cultivated. A child may be forced to say "thank you" to a relative for a Christmas present he or she doesn't really want (clothing rather than some toy); he or she will say the words, but we know they don't mean them. We have been trained as well to use the Christian vocabulary of giving thanks to God, but do we really mean what we say? Again, gratitude is not commanded, it is only cultivated—cultivated by an awareness, by an attentiveness to what is around me and within me, by "wasting time" on some form of meditation or prayer, an activity which may appear to have no productive value, but which in fact situates oneself into the wider scheme of things. We have to allow ourselves to become conscious of so many of the things we take for granted, and therein we find wisdom.

The three examples Jesus gives us of the kingdom of God are all about discovery, surprise, thankfulness. In each we have a sense of familiar territory having been crossed or searched many times without success (a field, a collection of gems, a lake), until one day unaccountably a fortune is suddenly within one's grasp. Woven into the familiar context of our lives, are the opportunities for discovery, opportunities to be surprised by what was there all the time, but which escaped our notice, viz., the signs of God's love for us, for which we can be truly grateful. So, the kingdom of God is, before any heavy theological talk, quite simply an experience—an experience of discovery, of recognizing God to be at the source of every good thing received. And the response to this experience can only be gratitude, thankfulness, whereby I orient my life around a new pivot, focusing less on achieving and more on receiving, because now I see to the heart of the matter, now I possess not just knowledge, technique or know-how, now I possess wisdom.

Let me conclude with a prayer that sums up the theme of today's Gospel. "Everywhere and every day, may I see and relish and rejoice in the abundant evidence of your presence—Your beauty and power, Your wisdom and voice, Your goodness—in refreshing rain, flower and tree. May this avid seeing and hearing aid my remembrance of You. Please guide me to see all people, all choices, all material things, from the angle and perspective of eternity. Oh God, help me to see and hear with senses

innocent, new, original." [from The Virgin Eye, by Robin Daniels].