

17th Sunday in Ord. Time -- July 25-26, 2020

Once again this Sunday we heard parables from Jesus about the Kingdom of Heaven. In today's gospel, Jesus uses our common human desire for wealth and riches and compares God's kingdom to a fortune waiting to be found in a field or a pearl of great value.

These parables are meant to get us all thinking about what is of greatest value and treasure to us and what we are willing to give or risk to acquire them.

We have all had to make important decisions about school, work, jobs, relationships, health issues, etc. Sometimes those choices did not seem to turn out that well. We might look at the process that we followed to come to our decision. Unfortunately, we sometimes go back to the same process of discernment and wind up with the same unfavorable outcome.

If we are looking for a better outcome we may have to try a new approach. For example, turning our decisions over to God's direction. This isn't the same as rolling the dice or throwing darts at a board of options.

How do we make crucial life decisions – is it by going over a list of pros and cons? Is it by hoping for good results? Or by asking everyone we know for advice and splitting the difference? How about trying prayer.

If something is truly important we might pray for clarity to make the wise choice and then trust that the outcome, whatever it is, will work toward our good as God sees it.

As St. Paul says today, “We know that God makes all things work for good for those who love God.

That is what Solomon chose to do when God offered to give him whatever he asked for. Though wisdom is usually associated with the elderly, it is more than intelligence or a lifetime of experience. Solomon saw the value of wisdom and asked God for it even in his young age. As he enters into the role of being king of Israel, he asks God not for wealth or power or long life but for a “listening heart”. This is an understanding pays close attention to the complexity of people's situations in order

to discern right from wrong in them. The Lord is pleased with his request and grants him an abundance of wisdom.

Actually, we too receive the same offer from Jesus that Solomon got. We can ask for what we need and trust in God's care for us. What do we need in our life at this time?

What would happen if we received what we pray for? How would it change our life? What are the risks of getting what we treasure? Psychological risks? Financial? Emotional? The treasures in the Gospel parables are discovered as pearls and valuable coins. For most people, the treasures in life are not found in material wealth or remarkable events but in everyday existence. A treasure or precious moment can be a call or visit from a close friend, a small child bringing us a flower or gift, a compliment from someone we care about.

What is God's treasure? Do we see ourselves or others in our parish and community as treasures? What are we willing to do to help all in our community to hear the call of Christ more clearly?

The Christian life ought to be a source of joy for us as opposed to something we do out of a grudging sense of duty. Some of this joy is reflected in the first two parables. In each, people eagerly sell whatever they have to take possession of a prized object. This is what it ought to be for us with respect to the kingdom of heaven. Once we realize what it is, what a prize we have, we then joyfully reorient all our priorities in light of it.

The longer gospel reading gives us one more parable, but it has another message. The net cast into the sea brings in a terrific catch. The net is returned with good fish, but also with fish and things that are not so good. The latter are thrown away. There will be a judgement at the end of life. This parable is similar to the one last week about farmer whose field of good seed was also sowed with weeds by an enemy. These two parables present God's kingdom as not being so neat and tidy in this world. In the end only the good fish will be kept, but which are the good ones and which the bad? The parable is unclear about that. The end is not so clear. Those who are sinners and who struggle in life hear this as good news.

Things might turn out differently than they appear today. Jesus warns us that tax collectors and others will get to heaven ahead of some who are very conscientious rule-keepers.

Then Jesus asks us – “Do you understand all these things?” This reinforces a point that he made in the parable of the sower, namely that his followers must study and reflect on his teaching until they see how to put them into practice that will bear fruit for the kingdom. We will be judged on the fruitfulness of our life.

How could we reflect more deeply on the decisions we are making to see whether they are leading us into the reign of God. What guidance can our Church and community members offer us to realize the reign of God in our life?

We tend to complicate our notions of God, but the readings and parables of these last Sundays suggest something otherwise. They tell us that perhaps God’s kingdom isn’t what we think. Something great can also be so small, so simple. Could God be closer than we realize?

In an age that values the lives of the “rich and famous,” being countercultural is not necessarily taking a big risk to gain some big treasure, but risking to live a seemingly average and ordinary lifestyle with grace. Again and again the Gospel calls us back to the basics -- a seed of love, the yeast of compassion, a grain of humility and hope.