

SR. CONSTANCE VEIT, LSP

GUEST COMMENTARY

I Found the Treasure in a Field

In our mid-summer weekday Masses, we read a series of parables from the Gospel of St. Matthew. These stories were perfect for summer with their portrayal of Jesus and his disciples by the sea and their images of farmers laboring in their fields.

One of these parables really caught my attention this summer. “The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Mt 13:44).

As I meditated on these words a flood of emotions arose in my heart. We had recently celebrated the first-ever World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly and I had been so happy to see our residents and their families enjoying themselves during our celebrations.

Sitting quietly in the chapel, the joy welling up in my heart served as an affirmation of my vocation. Ever since my days as a teenage volunteer in a home of the Little Sisters of the Poor, the elderly have been for me the treasure buried in a field – a precious treasure uniquely worth leaving everything else for and devoting my life to.

Over 40 years after my first encounter with the frail, memory-impaired residents of a nursing home, the elderly and our mission of hospitality to them are still my greatest joy.

How I wish that more young people would discover the joy and fulfillment that can be found sharing life with the elderly, like I did! And so, I make this appeal to young people: As the number of older persons in our population continues to grow at an exponential rate, I urge you to consider pursuing a religious vocation or a career at the service of our most vulnerable seniors! They are worth your effort and hard work, and they deserve our attention.

As I reflected on the parable of the treasure buried in the field, I couldn't help dwelling on a specific detail – the treasure was hidden, perhaps even discarded. I think this also applies to the elderly, who all too often find themselves relegated to the margins of our frenetic lives.

In his homily on the World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly, Pope Francis asked, “When was the last time we visited or telephoned an elderly person in order to show our closeness and to benefit from what they have to tell us?”

He continued, “I worry when I see a society full of people in constant motion too caught up in their own affairs to have time for a glance, a greeting or a hug. I worry about a society where individuals are simply part of a nameless crowd, where we can no longer look up and recognize one another. Our grandparents, who nourished our own lives, now hunger for our attention and our love; they long for our closeness. Let us lift up our eyes and see them, even as Jesus sees us.”

Referring to the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, the Gospel reading for that day, Pope Francis compared the elderly to the leftover fragments of bread. “No person is ever to be discarded. ... Grandparents and the elderly are not leftovers from life, scraps to be discarded. They are precious pieces of bread left on the table of life that can still nourish us with a fragrance that we have lost, ‘the fragrance of memory.’”

Our elders “protected us as we grew, and now it is up to us to protect their lives, to alleviate their difficulties, to attend to their needs and to ensure that they are helped in daily life,” the pope said. “Let us protect them, so that nothing of their lives and dreams may be lost.... Let us covenant with them. Let us learn to approach them, listen to them and never discard them. Let us cherish them and spend time with them. We will be the better for it.”

Recent demographic projections indicate that by 2030 roughly 31 million Americans will be over the age of 75, and we will be facing a shortage of crisis proportions in the number of geriatric-trained caregivers.

Surveys cite two reasons why so few young physicians choose to work with older adults – geriatrics is one of the least lucrative specialties in medicine and it is also one of the least glamorous.

The same survey that produced these findings did, however, include one positive finding. Among 42 medical specialties, geriatricians reported the greatest level of job satisfaction!

So, if you want to make a difference in the world, if you want to do something truly counter-cultural and if you want to find fulfillment, cherish the elderly. May they be for you, as they have been for me, a pearl of great price!

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