

# 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

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| <i>First Reading</i>      | 1 Kings 3:5, 7-12   |
| <i>Response</i>           | Lord, I love your commands.   |
| <i>Psalm</i>              | Psalm 119:57, 72, 76-77, 127-128, 129-130   |
| <i>Second Reading</i>     | Romans 8:28-30  |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | Blessed are you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth;<br>you have revealed to little ones the mysteries of the<br>kingdom. |
| <i>Gospel</i>             | Matthew 13:44-52  |

The 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time brings our study of the discourse on the parables of Jesus in Matthew 13 to a conclusion by looking at three final parables and then Jesus's last words at the end of the discourse. So it's a shorter Gospel for this Sunday so let's read it through together and then we will go back and ask a few questions and unpack them. The gospel begins as follows, Matthew 13:44

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.

"Have you understood all this?" They said to him, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of

heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."<sup>1</sup>

Alright, that is the end of the Gospel. Let's walk through each of those together. You can see here that Jesus gives three parables of the kingdom, three last parables of the kingdom, that are a little bit shorter, and he ends with this final statement about scribes who are trained for the kingdom of God. So what's going on in these verses? Well the first thing I want to say is, as with some of the other parables, these first two that we have for this Sunday have a bit of a twist to them that helps us to get into an understanding of what the mystery exactly is that Jesus is trying to reveal. In other words, you have to look for the surprising element in the parable, the riddle, and that will give you an insight into the mystery of the kingdom. So although the parables are very familiar, there are parts of them that are a bit strange if you stop and reflect for a second, or you try to put yourself in the shoes of Jesus's first century Jewish audience.

So with regard to the first parable, the treasure hidden in the field, we can see already that there's an unexpected element here. Think about this for a second. If you are walking along and you found a treasure hidden in a field, what would you do? Well, I don't know about you, but if I wanted to keep the treasure I would dig it up and take it with me. But that is not what the person does here. It says here that he found the treasure in a field and he covered it up and then in joy he goes and sells all that he has to buy that field. That's a weird response to finding a hidden treasure. Usually people would just take the treasure and then go and use it and sell it, right!? And become rich or use it to buy what they want. This guy finds the treasure, apparently buries it again, covers it up and he goes and buys the land on which the treasure is hidden. What's going on here? What is Jesus trying to say? Well I think here that the basic message of the parable again lies in the twist. Namely this, you cannot steal the kingdom of God. You have to give everything in order to obtain it. So he can't unjustly obtain the kingdom, he has to go sell all that he has and buy the field where the treasure is hidden. So this tells us both that the kingdom is a hidden reality, it is not lying about on the ground, it is something that

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

is buried, that's hidden, but it's also something that can't be stolen. We have to give all that we have if we are going to possess it. And yet at the same time, even though it is hidden, it's valuable, it's precious, it's actually going to make us spiritually rich with the rewards of everlasting life. So that is the first parable, a great parable, especially if you love — like I do — novels like *Treasure Island*. This idea of hunting for lost treasure, the quest for lost gold, it is something that you find in all different human cultures, the idea of seeking for a treasure. So Jesus takes that common theme of lost treasure, of hidden gold, and he uses it to show us that the kingdom is precious, the kingdom is valuable, that it's worth everything. It is worth losing everything.

A similar image is found in the second parable here, which is commonly known as the pearl of great price. So it says that the kingdom is like a merchant who is in search of fine pearls, and he, when he finds this one pearl of great value, goes and sells all that he has and buys that pearl. Now again, where's the twist in here? Well on the one hand, it seems like it might be just a common story about someone looking for pearls. The twist though is in the way the man responds. If you found — again put yourself in his place — this one pearl, this beautiful great pearl of great price, would you sell everything in order to obtain it? In other words, would you sell your house, sell your clothes, all of your possessions in order to obtain the pearl? That is going to be a problem because can you eat a pearl? Can you drink a pearl? Can you dwell in a pearl? Will it give you shelter? No! In other words, the man overreacts, in a sense, to the discovery of the great pearl. He gives away everything for the sake of this one thing, this pearl of great price. It seems like he is, in a sense, crazy. If you found someone who was walking along in tattered clothes and didn't own anything and you asked him "are you okay? Is everything alright?" And he answered "Oh I have my pearl and that is all I need," you would think that that person was a little crazy, a little mentally unstable. And so this merchant here who gives away everything for the sake of this one pearl is, in a sense, doing what Jesus is calling his disciples to do. He's calling them to be foolish in the eyes of the world. He is calling them to live a radical life of discipleship, where nothing else matters except the one thing. And that one thing, that pearl of great price, is the kingdom of God, it is the kingdom of heaven.

The next parable here is commonly called the parable of the dragnet. I like to call it the parable of the cast net, because I grew up in South Louisiana and one of the

ways we would fish is we would take these cast nets with weights all around the outside — it was a circle — and you throw it into the bayou and then you would pull it in with a rope and you'd see what came up. So I can really identify with this parable from my experience fishing as a boy. What Jesus says here is that “the kingdom is like a net [like a cast net] that would be thrown into the sea.” This was a standard method of fishing in the sea of Galilee, to use a cast net rather than fishing with a line and a hook because you can catch lots of fish at one time. So “it was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; now when it was full, the men drew the net ashore and they sat down and they sorted the good fish into vessels, but they threw away the bad.” This is one of those parables where I think it's a basic comparison and I don't think that there's any real twist or unexpected dimension here, or at least nothing I can find here, because if you have had any experience fishing with a cast net, you'll know that sometimes the net brings up stuff that you want and sometimes it brings up stuff that you don't want. I can remember one time when we were fishing and throwing after some perch in the bayou, we pulled in the net and guess what was in the net? An alligator! That was not what we were trying to catch. So there is good and there is bad in the net, and what happens is the men take the net out and they begin to sort the good fish, to separate the good fish, put them in buckets or vessels or baskets, and then throw away the bad.

So here Jesus says that that is like an allegory, it's kind of like a comparison, a symbol for the final judgment. At the end of the age, the angels, who are like fishermen, are going to come, they are going to separate the evil from the righteous, and they are going to throw the evil into the furnace of fire, which would be hell, eternal separation from God, and then in that furnace of fire men will weep and gnash their teeth. That is one of Jesus' standard images for describing Hell. So this is a great example of how Jesus' parables would indeed draw on realities from everyday life. Again, growing up as a boy in South Louisiana and doing a lot of fishing, you know that some fish are worth keeping and some fish are not. So if you would catch for example a bass or speckled trout, you want to keep that. If you catch a choupique or a garfish, it is not worth anything, you just throw it away because it's not good to eat. So Jesus here is using a very earthy image to describe the separation of the righteous and the wicked at the end of time; in other words, to describe the final judgment. I think this is important for us to stress here because a lot of times, especially contemporary Christians, we are often unsure about what to

believe about the end of time. Will there be an end of time? Will there be an end of the age? Is there actually going to be a final judgment and a division between the righteous and the wicked? Is there a real heaven and hell? And if you look at the Gospels, Jesus is extremely clear, he makes no bones about it. In fact, if you add it up, Jesus talks about heaven and hell — and in particular he talks about hell — more than all the rest of the New Testament combined. Why? Well because he loves us and he wants all human beings, as 1 Timothy 2 says, “he desires all men to be saved,” so it is important for them to understand the truth about righteousness and sin and the truth about heaven and hell. So he uses something they would've all been familiar with, separating bad fish from good fish, keeping the good fish and throwing away the bad as an image for that final separation at the end of time. In a sense, this parable of the dragnet is a kind of companion to the parable of the weeds and the wheat, which was also, as we saw, about the final judgment and about the division of the righteous and the wicked at the end of time by the angels in the kingdom.

Okay, with that said then, the final statement here of Jesus for the discourse, it isn't a parable per se, but it is a kind of riddle-like proverb of Jesus, where he asks the Apostles “have you understood the parables?” And they say “yes.” And then he says to them “therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” What does that mean? It is a very cryptic sayings, it's a very mysterious saying. There are a couple things I think we can point out about it. First, a scribe, who was a scribe in Jewish culture? Well a scribe was somebody who would not only know how to write because he had been trained, they were literate, but in particular they were someone who studied the Scriptures. They would make copies of the Jewish scriptures and they would also study the Scriptures, ponder the Scriptures, they were kind of the ancient equivalent of a biblical scholar, someone who devotes their life to unpacking the word and the meaning of the word of God as found in the Scriptures.

So Jesus here is in essence calling his disciples to be like scribes who were trained for the sake, not of the law of Moses, but for the kingdom of heaven. So they're supposed to study the Scriptures and through their training, they are to bring out what is new, the good news of the kingdom, the unexpected elements that Jesus is giving to them in the parables, the mysteries, but also what is old, looking at the

mystery of the kingdom in light of the Old Testament and how the Old Testament is going to be fulfilled in the New, and then the New is going to be concealed in the Old. So in a sense I love this proverb, because this is what I love to do as a teacher of Scripture, is to try to look at that relationship between the old and the new, to see how often, Augustine said, the New Testament is concealed in the Old Testament, but then the Old is revealed in the New. And that is what Jesus is doing with the apostles here. He's training them to go out and proclaim the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God, which is a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, but it also goes beyond the Old Testament. There is something new that Jesus is revealing through his parables about this great mystery of the kingdom. There is something unexpected there and that's what the Apostles are being trained to bring out.

In order to do that though they have to have understanding and so if we go back to the first reading for the day, the first reading from the Old Testament is from 1 Kings 3, and it is the famous story of young Solomon the king's request for wisdom and understanding. Most people are familiar with the story, but I will read it anyway and just try to draw a connection between the old and new here, to do what Jesus says. 1 Kings 3:5 says:

At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I shall give you."

Alright, pause there. If God appeared to you in a dream and said "ask what I shall give you?" What would you ask for? What would you ask God for? If you could have anything you wanted, what would be the deepest desire of your heart? What would you ask him for? Just think about that for a second and now look at what Solomon asks for. In verse 7 it says:

And now, O LORD my God, thou hast made thy servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And thy servant is in the midst of thy people whom thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered or counted for multitude. Give thy servant therefore...

A new car? A big house? A New job? Let me win the lottery? No, no, no.

...an understanding mind to govern thy people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to govern this thy great people?"

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.

Wow, this is a beautiful passage from the Old Testament. There we see young King Solomon not ask for earthly pleasure or earthly wealth or earthly power even, what he asked for is two things: an understanding mind, so for the grace of an illuminated intellect, and for the ability to discern between good and evil, so an ability to choose, to recognize, what's good and what's evil so that he can choose the good. This is an amazing story and this is why we talk about the wisdom of King Solomon, and it's also why God goes on to bless him and bless the kingdom under him, under Solomon, to bring in the first era of peace and prosperity in the history of Israel. Up to this point it has been bloodshed, war and strife, Solomon ushers in peace and prosperity because of his great gift, in humility asking for wisdom and the ability to discern good and evil. So with that in mind then, that's really the background to Jesus' teachings about the scribes training for the kingdom, that they need wisdom to understand the mysteries of the kingdom, and the gift of grace to choose the good.

And sure enough the Psalm for this day, Psalm 119, which is one of the longest Psalms — it might be the longest Psalm — in the Old Testament, is this great hymn of praise to the law of God. And the refrain is "Lord, I love your law." And there are several things that the Psalm says. I am not going to read the verses, but it basically describes the law of God as being "better than thousands of gold pieces." The psalmist describes the law of God as "his delight." And in verse 127 — I will read this one verse on second thought — the psalmist says "therefore I love thy commandments above gold, above fine gold." So for the Psalmist, the true treasure is the Scriptures. The true treasure is the law of God as given to him in the Scriptures. And for him, the Scriptures are more precious than gold, even of

the finest of gold. That is a real challenge to us, to ponder as we think about what Jesus is calling us to, if he's calling us to be scribes trained for the kingdom of God, to bring out of the treasure chest both what is old and what is new. Do we regard the word of God, do we regard the Scriptures as more precious than gold? Do we regard the Scripture as fine gold? And if we do, how do we live that out? If we really believe that about the Scripture, if we learn to love the Scriptures, then we are going to make it part of our daily life, every single day we should be reading the Bible. Every single day we should be meditating on Scripture, like we saw the Catechism say a few weeks back, so that we don't become like one of the first three kinds of soil in the parable of the sower. We want to learn not just to read the Scripture out of an obligation or duty, "okay, I am going to read the Bible again," but out of a love for the commandments, to recognize that the only way we will ever have peace, the only way we will ever have joy is by growing in wisdom and understanding and by receiving the word of God in the Scriptures themselves. This is how the Church has interpreted these parables over the centuries.

In closing, I want to give two insights from the tradition. The first is from St. Irenaeus of Lyons. St. Irenaeus of Lyons is one my favorite saints, he lived in the second century A.D. He was one of the first great systematic theologians in the history of the Church and he wrote a famous book called *Against Heresies*. In that book he talked about the parable of the treasure hidden in the field and what he says is that the treasure that Jesus is talking about is not just the kingdom, but it's actually Christ himself. That Jesus is that treasure. Let me read the words here of St. Irenaeus:

For Christ is the treasure which was hid in the field, that is, in this world (for "the field is the world"); but the treasure hid in the Scriptures is Christ, since He was pointed out by means of types and parables.<sup>2</sup>

So notice what it is saying there, Christ is the treasure hidden in the field because in the other parable, the parable of the weeds and the wheat, the field is the world, so Christ comes into the world as fully divine and fully human, but his divinity is hidden. So the treasure of his divinity is, in a sense, hidden under the veil of his humanity, under his coming into the world. But that that treasure is also hidden in

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<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.26.1; ANF, 1.496)



the Scriptures, because Christ is there present in the Old Testament in types and in parables. So if we look at the prefigurations, the prototypes of Jesus in the Old Testament, although you can't see it right at first, but if you begin to study the old in light of the new, you'll see that Jesus is everywhere in the Old Testament. He's being anticipated, he is being prefigured, and he is hidden in the Old Testament, kind of like a treasure hidden in the field. But he is also hidden in the parables, right!? The parables are these riddles, these mysteries, that in a sense conceal the great treasure of the kingdom of God. This is a beautiful image from St. Irenaeus that I thought I would share with you. I really like that idea of Christ as the treasure hidden in the field of the Old Testament and hidden in the field of the world in the incarnation.

The final thing you might ask about this just in terms of practical applications is this, okay so in those two parables the merchant sells all that he has and buys that pearl and the man sells all that he has and buys the treasure hidden in the field, well how do I live that out? Am I supposed to go and literally sell everything that I have in order to pursue the kingdom of God? There are some people who are called to that. For example, a Franciscan friar or priest who might take a vow of absolute poverty, chastity and obedience, sells all that he has and doesn't own any thing except the clothes on his back, and maybe not even those. So some Christians will live that radical call to discipleship. But what about a layperson, a man with a wife and a family, like myself a father of five? How do we live out these parables? And here I always return to one of my other favorite saints, St. Francis de Sales — he is the patron of my diocese. He wrote a great book called *Introduction to the Devout Life*, which is a classic of spirituality precisely because it was written for laypeople. It is one of the few classic works of spirituality that wasn't written for priests or monks or nuns, but written for laypeople in particular. In part 3, paragraph 15, St. Francis talks about how to practice the spirit of poverty even while living in the world. So while we might not sell all that we have, because we have the duty to provide for our families, we can still live the spirit of the kingdom and the spirit of poverty in this way:

[W]e must practice real poverty in the midst of all the goods and riches God has given us. Frequently give up some of your property by giving it with a generous heart to the poor. To give away what we have is to impoverish

ourselves in proportion as we give, and the more we give, the poorer we become...

So the first way of living the spirit of the parables is to give alms. In particular, to give our property, give our money away to the poor to provide for those less fortunate than us. The second way is even more interesting, he says this also:

If you meet with losses that impoverish you either very much or a little, as in the case of tempests, fires, floods, droughts, thefts, or lawsuits, that is the proper time to practice poverty by accepting your losses meekly and patiently and by courageously submitting to such poverty.<sup>3</sup>

So the second thing he says there is that a layperson can live the spirit of poverty both by voluntarily giving their property away, giving to the poor, but also when they experience losses that are involuntary, whether to a flood, fire, theft or lawsuit; not to grow angry, not to grow bitter, but to accept those losses gently and meekly and courageously, accepting the things that we cannot control. And that is the way as a layperson you can cultivate the spirit of the parables and the spirit of poverty without living a consecrated life where you take a radical vow of poverty to actually sell everything that you have. So there are different states of life, different ways to live out Jesus' message of the kingdom, and the Church has always recognized that. But in this case, we see here Jesus calling us, all of us, whether we are in the lay state, married state, or whether we are single, a religious, a priest or monk, or whatever it is, all of us have to seek first the kingdom of God in our lives and everything else will be given to us as well.

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<sup>3</sup> Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 3.15 [trans. John Ryan, pp. 153, 155]