

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

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SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage for this Sunday comes from the Gospel of Matthew 13:44–52. In this section, Jesus teaches three more parables to communicate the mystery of the Kingdom: the Buried Treasure, the Pearl of Great Price, and the Dragnet. Each of these parables offers us a challenging teaching on discipleship and is meant to encourage our total irrevocable commitment to the Lord, as well as govern and focus our missionary outreach to others.

The first parable concerns that of the man who accidentally finds a treasure buried in a field. This was territory that he had most likely walked over many times without realizing what was right beneath his feet. Then one day he suddenly discovers the treasure that has been there all along, and when he does, he commits all his resources to acquiring that treasure as his own. The experience of stumbling upon buried treasure continues to happen in our world today as we occasionally read stories of people discovering a treasure trove of ancient coins buried in various locations. These discoveries occur because the practice of burying valuables was a common method of protecting them in the ancient world especially during times of political or military uncertainty. This is a wonderful teaching for all of us who can so easily take our blessings for granted. All too often, we pass by buried treasure every day in the many blessings of family and friends that surround us. Sometimes we only appreciate the treasure we have when we lose it. Every now and then we are given the grace to see things in our lives in a new way so as to appreciate the extraordinary in the ordinary. When these moments occur, we sometimes wonder how we could have missed, overlooked, or taken for granted such a valuable blessing. Suddenly, all our priorities change and we understand what is really important. The greatest treasure we can rediscover is that God loves us, God is with us, and God forgives us. That is the Good News Jesus came to bring through His life and ministry. When we discover the reality of God's love, we will do whatever it takes to have that loving relationship. In such a relationship, we treasure what God treasures and so the Kingdom becomes realized in our midst. The man's action of selling all he has in order to acquire the field with the buried treasure exemplifies the total commitment God desires of all disciples who pursue the Kingdom. It is important to note that we are told the man was joyful when he made that total commitment. This response means that the man focused his attention on what he had gained rather than what he has sold in order to acquire the treasure. Joy is not always our response when we are asked to make an all-inclusive commitment to God that requires sacrifice. The man's joy invites us to examine those inordinate attachments that prevent us from making an all-encompassing commitment to God and willingly, even joyfully, sacrificing for the sake of that Kingdom.

What are some of the treasures that people overlook in their lives today?

What familiar things in your life have you come to see in a new way and to value as great treasure after having taken them for granted?

What experiences led you to this realization?

The man in the parable committed everything in his life to obtain that treasure. For what have you sacrificed most everything in your life?

When and how have you come to realize God's love for you, and when have you made a complete and irrevocable commitment to the Lord in response to His love?

When has a commitment of faith caused you sadness because of what it cost you?

The second parable concerns that of a man who is specifically looking for, and finds, a really valuable pearl. Like the previous parable, the finding of the pearl requires that the man sell all he has in order to purchase this one, really valuable pearl. Unlike the man in the previous parable, however, he does not stumble upon the pearl by accident. Instead, he is specifically searching for something and knows it when he sees it. That, too, is like the Kingdom of God. It is helpful to know what we are looking for in order to recognize it and respond to it. The Gospels relate various scenes in the life of Jesus to help us see what the Kingdom of God is like and so to better recognize opportunities and experiences of the Kingdom in our own lives. Because the Kingdom of God requires our total commitment, we cannot have the Pearl of Great Price unless we are willing to let go of all competing priorities and values. That means we cannot obtain the Kingdom unless we are willing to let go of sinful attitudes or actions of greed, selfishness, and so forth. Letting go of what we are holding on to is a necessary requirement to obtain what we are searching for.

What is the treasure you are looking for in your life right now?

What treasure do you think Jesus wants you to seek?

What is worth the commitment of your whole life?

When have you found what you were looking for and made a radical commitment to obtain it?

What is the Lord asking you to let go of in order to whole-heartedly accept His reign in your life?

What parts of your life do you try to separate from God's reign?

The final parable concerns that of the Dragnet being swept in the sea and is filled with all kinds of fish. Only when the net is full is it time to separate the good from the bad catch of fish. When Matthew tells us that the bad are to be thrown out, he uses a word that is used elsewhere in his Gospel to describe the evil deeds of people (Mt 7:17–18 and Mt 12:33). Thus, the “bad fish” are known to be such based on their deeds.

There are two points for us in this parable. The first point is that judgment and condemnation are not our responsibilities. Like the parable from last week's Gospel passage about the weeds among the wheat, the role of judgment and condemnation is always reserved to the Lord and His angels. The responsibility of the Church, and of disciples, is to welcome and encourage all people to grow deeper in authentic faith and to pray for conversion, reconciliation, and repentance.

The second point is that judgment is based on our deeds in the eyes of God. It is difficult to remain pure when we are surrounded by corruption and others' bad deeds. Sometimes we can wonder if it's worth the effort to live a life of faithfulness and sacrifice when others seem to be doing well while living a life that is contrary to the values of the Gospel. This parable is for us in those moments of question or doubt. The challenge for disciples is to live in a world filled with corrupt deeds yet not to be corrupted by what surrounds us. Rather, we are to show to those bad fish an attractive life of focused discipleship that is willing to commit all to the person of Jesus and that finds joy in the Gospel.

This is the same joy of the man who buys the field with the buried treasure. By doing so, we clearly distinguish what is “good” from what is “bad” while inviting others to discover the same treasure we have found. That treasure is the gift of an enduring, committed, loving relationship with God. When the net is raised out of the water, what a great thing it would be for all the fish to be good! The parable of the Dragnet reminds us that the basis of judgment will not be appearance or words or external religiosity;

rather, the basis of judgment will be whether or not we have allowed ourselves to be caught by the Lord and whether our deeds are found to be good in His eyes.

When have you seen otherwise religious people do bad things?

What thoughts delude people into thinking their actions don't matter when it comes to God's judgment?

Sometimes we are focused more on who is next to us in the net than our own lives and how we will be judged before the Lord. How does this parable cause you to reconsider your own need for conversion?

When have you been tempted to follow the example of others who seem to get ahead by their bad deeds?

How can a faith community help people want to persevere in good deeds when there are so many bad examples around us?

Jesus ends this section on the Parables of the Kingdom with an instructive teaching concerning what it means to be a wise and a learned scribe. He wants us to be disciples who are able to appreciate what is good about both the "old" and the "new" regarding matters of faith. When it comes to God's action in the world, we can anticipate that the Lord will always be consistent with His previous self-revelation, but we should not expect that God will always conform to previous self-revelation. That is a complicated way of saying that the same God continues to reveal Himself in new ways. The example of the learned scribe encourages us to be people who are always looking for God's presence in new ways while not losing sight of what the Lord has already revealed. Thus, we are to be people deeply rooted in Scripture and Tradition yet open to the Lord's presence in surprising and enlightening ways. It was specifically a lack of openness to the Lord's presence in new and surprising ways that caused the Jewish leaders of Jesus' time to reject Him and His teaching. On the other hand, it was the openness of the disciples that allowed them to recognize, accept, and respond to the revelation of God in Jesus. Our Lord wants us to follow the example of the first disciples who were always open to God's revelation however the Lord wished to accomplish it.

What temptations exist in the Church today to value only what is "old"?

What temptations exist in the Church today to value only what is "new" and to dismiss what is old?

How do we try to protect our own comfort, control, and security by resisting new challenges in life?

What values or qualities do we need in order to embrace our contemporary challenges without compromising our Christian principles and ideals?