

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Romans 8:28-30 & Matthew 13:44-52

On the day I married, I had a profound religious experience. As I entered the church, I was stressed out. I found a large crowd gathered in the back of the church. When I spotted my 6'4" fiancé across the crowd, I realized, with powerful clarity, that marrying John would be one of the truest things I could do with my life. Regularly returning to that moment of clarity reenergizes my commitment to our marriage. It steers me toward behaviors that build our relationship and that bring God's love to others. It is one thing to be called; it is another to respond. A commitment requires hard work, doing things differently and a serious output of energy. We do not make this kind of commitment for just anything, but once we do, we put our back into it.

Jesus wants us to see the Kingdom of Heaven in this way. He tells the parable of the treasure in the field. In the ancient Middle East, it was common to bury valuables so that robbers or invading armies would not take them. Unfortunately, the original owner frequently did not get to retrieve these possessions. People today still find caches buried millennia ago. In the parable, the digger buys the field, without revealing its true value. Sounds sneaky, but Jesus emphasizes that our desire for the Kingdom of Heaven should be so strong that we use all our wiles to make it our own. Notice that the person's willingness to pay all they have originates "out of joy." Likewise, the kingdom will bring us joy because it is what we really desire. The digger was clear about this. Are we? And are we making the sacrifices to realize it? Our lives must look different. We must make a crazy, all-in effort to possess the Kingdom of Heaven.

Interestingly, the person who stumbles on the treasure was digging in someone else's field. This is more wily behavior, but not in a negative sense. After all, the final parable in this week's gospel says, "Every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from the storeroom both the new and the old." The image combines the qualities of a scribe, who spends his life studying and teaching Scripture, and the head of a house, who wisely and with authority uses both the new and the old to take care of everyone. If we want to learn all we can about the Kingdom of Heaven, we must remember the treasures of our Christian tradition. The person who digs in another's field is looking to the wisdom of previous generations to find the Kingdom.

This message is helpful for our pandemic-weary nation. When people were forced to stop their frenetic lives in March, I was hopeful that it could be a time when people would discover the benefits of quiet time and building relationships. Now, as I watch people foolishly race back to "normal" life, causing infection and death rates to rise, I think we missed out on bringing out the "old" from the storeroom. Westerners sometimes assume that only what is new is worth knowing or using, so we looked to a personal spirituality or to psychology to get through. We did not study the gospels or Christian tradition filled as it is with saints and communities who invited God into their struggles. Without this wisdom, we have been unable to live mercifully over the long haul.

This week's passage from Romans describes how a believer changes. "We know that all things work for good for those... who are called according to God's purpose." God's plan of moving us toward salvation unfolds without us doing a thing. Paul uses a chain of verbs to create the stream of conversion: foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified. The process leads to being conformed in the image of Jesus.

Of course, this isn't just a stream we float along passively. The choices we make and the energy we expend ought to be cooperating with this process. Thus, Jesus includes the parable of the dragnet. He challenges us to commit and change. We say we are Christians; have we lived in a way that builds the Kingdom? Do we look more and more like Jesus? Jesus' life work was setting captives free. That involved bucking systems, running risks, being tortured and abandoned and dying on a cross, convicted by the government and rejected by religious leaders. Unwilling to make the same sacrifices, we tell ourselves we do not have time to get involved in making our society more just or in healing ourselves, the planet and each other. The dragnet reminds us that we can only delay so long. At some point, "the angels will... separate the wicked from the righteous." Hmmm. Maybe it is time for us to commit ourselves to one of the truest things we can do with our lives. Maybe it is time to act like we really want the treasure we have found in Christ.

- ❖ What messages of the gospel do you treasure? How do they challenge you to change?
- ❖ What good works or acts of kindness have you been delaying?