

17A SML 2017
MT 13:44-46 (short form)

Over and over again in the gospels, we repeatedly find in Our Blessed Lord's words an absoluteness, and a lack of ambiguity:

No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. LK 9:62

If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off! (MT 5:29-30)

Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. (LK 9:24)

Seems pretty black and white to me . . . so where does anyone get the strength to be the disciple that Jesus demands? Isn't the one who abandons profession, house and family, living contrary to every measure of human society? Can anyone really live that way?

The answers to these questions are found in today's gospel in the double parable of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price, and in this double parable are the ends of the spectrum:

- ✓ At one end is the day laborer who is so poor he works in a field that is not his own.

- ✓ At the other end of the spectrum is a wholesale merchant who has business connections everywhere.
- ✓ At one end of the spectrum is the day laborer who comes across the treasure quite by accident.
- ✓ At the other end of the spectrum is the merchant who has been long and hard at work seeking precious pearls.

Jesus' point is the reign of God is open to everyone, the rich and the poor, and one may encounter it in altogether different ways: suddenly and unexpectedly, or as something always longed for and sought after.

So let's flesh out the parables. We can imagine the action of the first parable to go something like this:

A day laborer is working in a field. He is a wage worker; the field does not belong to him. That he is poor is evident from the fact that he has to sell "everything" he has to be able to buy the field: his broken-down house; its furniture and utensils, a few tools, his donkey.

While he was plowing the field, his plowshare struck the treasure, probably a large clay jar full of silver coins. He buries his hands forearm deep in the silver coins, and after he has counted it, throws dirt over what he found, looking over his shoulder to make sure no one is watching, and with unspeakable joy, he turns everything he has into cash and

buys the field. He's not bothered in the least by having to sell everything he has because his loss is nothing in comparison to what he will gain!

In the second parable, everything shifts. The actor is no longer a poor person but a wealthy merchant. This man is not described as a small shopkeeper, but a wholesale merchant, a man who imports and exports. The story takes place not in the country, but in the city, perhaps in the course of a trading journey, probably overseas somewhere. The merchant is a specialist in pearls; sought after in antiquity; they were then what big diamonds are today. Immense sums were paid for the most perfect of pearls.

One day, the merchant comes across a pearl of unusual size and perfection. The dealer is asking quite a bit for it, but, holding that pearl up to the light, the merchant knows that in the right place and at the right time he could get a price for that pearl that would make your head swim. So he sells all that he has, and buys the pearl, because it is the deal of a lifetime!

So what's the point?

- ✓ Putting a price tag on the reign of God? No. The reign of God is priceless!
- ✓ The unlimited willingness to sacrifice? No.

- ✓ The deal of a lifetime! The one time opportunity to seize the reign of God? A one shot deal? No.
- ✓ Regarding the day laborer, he wasn't exactly transparent with the landowner? The reign of God needs crooks like that? No.

1. Obviously the treasure and the pearl are of incomparable value.
2. Obviously the occasion is unique and will never return.
3. Obviously in such a situation one must act decisively and go for broke.
4. Obviously one must give everything to achieve the reign of God; only those who lose their life will gain it.

These parables must be read in light of the unimaginable joy with which the two treasure finders act. "In joy he goes and sells all he has" is the point of the parable. The joy and fascination of the find are so great that they shape the whole event. They have been seized by a joy that exceeds all measure.

What is so marvelous is that Jesus does not formulate this joy as a theory but tells it in a story. To be so moved by God's cause that one gives everything for its sake is not something one can do out of duty, a "thou shalt" or a "you must!" That we freely will what God wills means that we take joy in the beauty

of God's cause and long for what God wants. It's the joy of the reign of God that moves us again and again, and causes the grace of God to win out in this world.

That is inspiring, but is it pragmatic?

I had a woman come to see me recently. Her opener was, "I think God is playing tricks on me."

"How's that?"

"Father, I prayed so hard to live where I am living. I prayed like there was no tomorrow. And I got the house. But my neighbors are nuts! Nuts! I have to move." Anyone here have a new neighbor? She may be talking about you!

"Well, how about this time around, when you pray, you pray to find the house where God wants you to live."

When I was on my leave of absence, I networked for a job. Networked, networked and networked some more. And there were some pretty attractive jobs that I applied for. But the entire time, my prayer was, "God, help me to find the job you want me to have." So if I didn't get a job, I didn't get frustrated, I didn't cry "reverse discrimination" and I didn't cry politics. I understood that was not the job God wanted me to have.

In looking to buy a house, I searched and searched and searched, and I came across quite a few houses where I said,

“Perfect! This house is perfect!” I’d go home, call my realtor and learn that just that afternoon, a contract was put on “my perfect” house. So I prayed, “God, help me to find the house you want me to have.”

And as it turned out, in both cases, eventually, four years down the line, returning to the priesthood is the job God wanted me to have and living in a Rectory is the house where God wanted me to live, where I have found God’s treasure and the pearl of great price, the joy of the reign of God.

- ✓ Pray for the job God wants you to have.
- ✓ Pray for the house God wants you to have.
- ✓ Pray for the wife God wants you to have (if you don’t already have one!)
- ✓ Pray for the yada yada yada God wants you to have.
- ✓ Pray for the decision God wants you to make.

Otherwise, how is not giving yourself to God working for you?