

17th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Cycle A)

July 24, 2005 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

O.K., I admit it. Once in a while, I buy a lottery ticket. I mean, the money goes for education, right? So I'm really doing it for the children, right? Besides, every so often someone actually wins. Maybe next time it might be me.

I usually wait until it's up to about \$100 million or so. As if \$10 million wouldn't be enough. "Yeah, I won the PowerBall, but it was only \$10 million. Bummer."

What would you do with all that money? Suppose you actually won the PowerBall? Come on, admit it . . . you've thought about it, haven't you? Hasn't it at least crossed your mind?

You could buy anything you want. Anything that has a monetary value, that is. I've heard it said that money won't buy happiness, but it'll sure finance the illusion.

But like some of you, I've reached an age where I believe that physical possessions are easier to get than they are to get rid of. What would you want if you could have anything you want?

What if you won the lottery, then found out you had six months to live? What would you want then?

MOVE

Today's readings speak of a personal response to God and his Kingdom. It's a personal response that's expected of all of us.

If you sell all that you own just to buy something else – well, you're just exchanging one set of possessions for a different set of possessions. The images of hidden treasure and the pearl of great price are metaphors for the Kingdom of God. If you could trade everything you had for a place in the Kingdom, wouldn't you do it?

Particularly in today's Psalm, we hear a sense of rejoicing in the light of God's Law and the rejection of false ways. The psalmist says that God's way is worth more than "thousands of gold and silver pieces."

King Solomon had all the riches of his earthly kingdom at his disposal. He had the ability to own anything that money could buy. So when he's given the opportunity to ask for anything he wants . . . he prays for practical wisdom and prudence to discern for his people right from wrong. He recognized that love for what is right and just is more important than anything else. He recognized that the law of God overrules all other laws, and he loved the Law of God.

MOVE

It may sound strange to us that someone "loves" the law. We usually think of "law" as something that keeps us from doing something we want to do, as a restriction or limitation. But Solomon's understanding of law was very different from ours.

God's law wasn't just a set of prohibitions; it was a way or path to an end, and the end was salvation, being part of the Kingdom of God. We didn't hear the reading today, but in the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses offers his people a choice between two ways: he says, "Look, today I am offering you life and prosperity, death and disaster . . . if you love Yahweh your God and follow his ways, if you keep his commandments, his laws and his customs, you will live and grow numerous . . ." And Moses assured them that "this Law which I am laying down for you today is neither obscure for you or beyond your reach. . . . No, the word is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to put into practice."

MOVE

The Israelites wouldn't understand our approach to the law. Particularly in America, we think of the law as secular, and what might be called "minimalist." Where's the line? How close can I come to the line and still get away with it?

The idea of natural law, God's Law, doesn't come easy to us. The idea of law as a way to true fundamental human development is hard for some of us

to think about. It's not just a set of formal permissions or prohibitions, what you "may" and "may not" do.

Christian morality is not a morality of mere obligation; it is a morality of freedom which enables the human spirit to flourish.

MOVE

Don't we even think of religious practice in the same way we think of secular law? In terms of obligation and prohibition? Isn't it about two things . . . what is prohibited and therefore must be avoided, and what is obligatory and therefore cannot be avoided?

Is tomorrow a Holy Day of *obligation*? Do I *have to* go to Mass? How late can I arrive at Mass, and how early can I leave, and still fulfill my Sunday *obligation*? Yes, I know . . . in Memphis, the rule seems to be, "if you're there before it's over, you're not late."

Do I really *have to* abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent? How many venial sins can I commit and still squeak into heaven?

MOVE

I work with many couples preparing for marriage. Sometimes, couples see it in terms of "doing the required paperwork," or "meeting the Diocesan requirements," or "planning the wedding."

In my work in the Tribunal, I often see the outcome of that kind of thinking. People lavish all kinds of attention on "the wedding," and very little on "the marriage." That's why, when I'm preparing a couple for marriage, I try to emphasize that we are not preparing for a "wedding." We are preparing for a *marriage*. The wedding is about an hour or so on a single day of our lives. The marriage is about all the rest of our lives. Obeying the Church "law" on marriage is just one tiny part of reaching an understanding of the nature of marriage as understood by the Church.

MOVE

Still, we tend to judge ourselves and others religiously in terms of not breaking the moral law, of not doing wrong. Again, that's sort of a

minimalist attitude towards God and the religious meaning of life.

Sometimes we even perceive God and his law as a limitation, opposition, or even as a threat to what we want in our lives. We think of God as something external that takes from our life, something that keeps us from doing some of the things we want to do. We compartmentalize our lives, we create a division between what we want and what others want, God included. We draw a line no one can cross, not even God.

At the heart of this kind of is the idea that there's a conflict between what we want and what God wants. More and more, some people regard religion as a "slave morality" that keeps us subjugated, alienated and unhappy. They say that the idea of good and evil is obsolete.

It's part of what can make the world so confusing to us. The solution is to devote more time and attention to rediscovering the way to harmonize our lives with God's will. As I deal with the trials and tribulations of life on this earth, I try (not always successfully) to keep two rules in mind.

1. Don't sweat the small stuff.
2. It's ALL small stuff. Nobody gets out of here alive.

So, do we recognize the "pearls of great price" in our lives? Are we prepared to do whatever is necessary to possess them?

Reading I

1 Kgs 3:5, 7-12

The LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream at night.
God said, "Ask something of me and I will give it to you."
Solomon answered:
"O LORD, my God, you have made me, your servant, king
to succeed my father David;
but I am a mere youth, not knowing at all how to act.
I serve you in the midst of the people whom you have chosen,
a people so vast that it cannot be numbered or counted.
Give your servant, therefore, an understanding heart
to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong.
For who is able to govern this vast people of yours?"

The LORD was pleased that Solomon made this request.
So God said to him:
"Because you have asked for this--
not for a long life for yourself,
nor for riches,
nor for the life of your enemies,
but for understanding so that you may know what is right--
I do as you requested.
I give you a heart so wise and understanding
that there has never been anyone like you up to now,
and after you there will come no one to equal you."

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 119:57, 72, 76-77, 127-128, 129-130

R. (97a) Lord, I love your commands.

I have said, O LORD, that my part
is to keep your words.

The law of your mouth is to me more precious
than thousands of gold and silver pieces.

R. Lord, I love your commands.

Let your kindness comfort me
according to your promise to your servants.
Let your compassion come to me that I may live,
for your law is my delight.

R. Lord, I love your commands.

For I love your command
more than gold, however fine.
For in all your precepts I go forward;
every false way I hate.

R. Lord, I love your commands.

Wonderful are your decrees;
therefore I observe them.
The revelation of your words sheds light,
giving understanding to the simple.
R. Lord, I love your commands.

Reading II

Rom 8:28-30

Brothers and sisters:
We know that all things work for good for those who love God,
who are called according to his purpose.
For those he foreknew he also predestined
to be conformed to the image of his Son,
so that he might be the firstborn
among many brothers and sisters.
And those he predestined he also called;
and those he called he also justified;
and those he justified he also glorified.

Gospel

Mt 13:44-52 or 13:44-46

Jesus said to his disciples:
"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.
Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant
searching for fine pearls.
When he finds a pearl of great price,
he goes and sells all that he has and buys it.
Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea,
which collects fish of every kind.
When it is full they haul it ashore
and sit down to put what is good into buckets.
What is bad they throw away.
Thus it will be at the end of the age.
The angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous
and throw them into the fiery furnace,
where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.

"Do you understand all these things?"
They answered, "Yes."
And he replied,
"Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven
is like the head of a household

who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old."

or

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