

## 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time "A" Corpus Christy 2011

In the movie "City Slickers" three middle-aged urbanites paid handsomely for the fantasy of participating in an authentic Western cattle drive. The movie is a comedy, but it is also a commentary on the search for significance that many middle-aged people face in their thirties and forties.

Curley, the crusty trail boss told the three men, with a cryptic piece of advise, that if they wanted to find happiness in life they had to find the "one thing."

Throughout the movie the actors to find out what the "one thing" is. But Curley dies and the film ends, without a clear answer. Each man is left to figure out the "one thing" for himself.

What would be the "one thing" for you? Have you figured that out yet? What is the ingredient that makes all the parts of your life coherent?

What is the note that strikes deep in the heart that brings all the other notes of your life in harmony? What is the axle around which all the spokes of your life wheel can rotate?

This is more than a mid-life question. It is the quest of a lifetime. And Jesus gives us a clue to the answer in our Gospel lesson today.

According to Jesus, the "one thing" that matters most in life is the Kingdom of God. Matthew recorded his words earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, "seek first the Kingdom of God, and all else will be added to you."

In the twin parables that make up our Gospel lesson today, Matthew records two brief stories that illustrate that point.

**There are varieties of paths that lead us to experience the Kingdom of God.**

The parables of the Hidden Treasures and the Pearl of Great Price are twins, but they are not identical twins. In booth parables someone finds the one supreme treasure of life, represented by the treasure and the pearl.

That discovery makes all other possessions seem trivial, and they are traded for the surpassing value of owning that great treasure.

In both cases we might wonder at the economic wisdom of cashing in everything for just one great find, but that would miss the point Jesus is making. He is not giving a lesson on financial planning or investment strategy.

It is the reaction of the finder of the treasure that Jesus wants us to notice. He or she is so happy, so giddy, so overwhelmed by the discovery, that all else in their lives that seemed so valuable just moments before, now pales in comparison to the supreme value of the great treasure or pearl.

But notice also that the paths to this discovery vary greatly between the two parables. In the first, a tenant farmer is plowing the field of a landowner. He is doing his business in the ordinary way, when all of a sudden his plow strikes the lid of a treasure chest.

He is amazed, and then concerned that no one else discover his find, so he covers it back up with dirt. Immediately he sells all his possessions to buy that piece of land, much to the disapproval of his family and friends, I am sure. But no price he could pay for the land is too high, because he knows the treasure hidden in the field.

By the way, do not get caught up in the legal and moral implications of this transaction. The man is not terribly ethical, buying the land from the landowner without disclosing the find of the treasure.

Jesus often uses shady characters in his parables, because they were drawn from the stuff of real life. This parable does not hold up this land purchase as the example of business ethics. Jesus is simply illustrating the value of his discovery for the man, and the way it turned all his former plans and possessions upside down.

But the point is this, the farmer just stumbled across this treasure. He was not a treasure hunter sweeping the shore with a metal detector, or following a dusty map in search of buried treasure. It just appeared under his feet while he was doing something else.

By contrast, the pearl merchant who found the pearl of great price was an expert in this jewel. His entire life was given to the pursuit of this rare find. It is the culmination of an intentional search that spanned his lifetime.

And when he finally found that pearl, he instantly knew its value, and traded all his other inventory just to have that one pearl. His search for the Holy Grail was finished. He retired from his pearl business. He had finally found the jewel he hoped existed, but could only see in his dreams.

These two paths to the treasure illustrate for us that there are many paths to the discovery of the Kingdom of God. Some people come to faith almost naturally, accidentally.

They live their lives in the shadow of the steeple, surrounded by the Kingdom in their home, at their school, among their friends. And when they stumble across faith it is almost too easy. But it is no less important and valuable.

There is no great struggle, or life quest of searching down blind alleys, no intellectual struggles, or forays into moral depravity before they found faith. It just showed up under their feet.

But for others, like the pearl merchant, the path of faith is the result of a life quest. Like Solomon of the Old Testament, or Augustine of the Early Church, they find the truth of God and the value of relationship with God only after searching out the lesser value of materialism, power, intellectual prowess, or sexual freedom.

Only after panning through a lifetime of sand do they find the precious nugget of the Kingdom of God. And oh, the joy of that find!

**But however one finds the Kingdom of God, it is worth more than any other possession or passion in life.**

Here the twin parables converge again. No matter the path to the discovery, the resulting shifting of priorities is the same in the heart and life of the new owner. He has found the *sum mum bonum*, the "one thing" of life.

**All else can be traded easily to have this great treasure.**

And we can ask our selves: Is that how valuable our faith is to us? When we close our eyes in death, no amount of wealth or friends or power or position will mean much, will it?

All that matters in the end is that we belong to God. And there is the twist, it is not that the Kingdom of God belongs to us. It is that we belong to the Kingdom of God. It is not that what we own, it is Who owns us, that will count in the end.

Have you found your great treasure yet? If not, keep searching. God is closer than you might be able to imagine. And the treasure of knowing Him is far beyond your wildest dreams, God himself is the "ONE THING."

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