

**JULY 17, 2011: SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR**  
**Wisdom 12:13,16-19   Romans 8:26-27   Matthew 13:24-43**

Over the years I've had conversations with people who defended their not being members of any particular church by pointing out, "There're people in those churches who aren't doing what Jesus wants us to do!"

The make-up of God's people is always a mystery. On one hand we're supposed to be committed to carrying out whatever God asks; on the other, we're notorious for going against God's will. The recent sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic church provides just one example of such ecclesiastical tensions.

Today's three Sacred authors presume we're destined to deal with this "mixed bag" for the rest of our lives.

Our Wisdom author treats the issue from a unique perspective. He or she regards the problem as a way of surfacing Yahweh's mercy. "Your might is the source of justice; your mastery over all things makes you lenient to all." In other words, evil is no threat to Yahweh. God's power is the force behind God's relations (justice) with us. God has nothing to prove. "Though you are master of might, you judge with clemency, and with much lenience you govern us." Yahweh's power isn't demonstrated by the accomplishments of a blameless community, but by the accomplishment of a flawed, forgiven community.

Paul usually deals with similar problems - even in communities he evangelized. He's experienced enough imperfections to be able to instruct a community he hasn't evangelized (Rome) about the workings of the Holy Spirit. According to the Apostle's theology, Jesus shares his Spirit with us precisely because we can't do what we're expected to do, even when it comes to such an essential action as prayer.

"The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes with inexpressible groaning. And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will." The Holy Spirit simply makes up for what we lack, no matter how essential to faith. The Spirit is the sole source of our perfection.

Jesus' mixture of kingdom parables provides us with some of his ideas about the Christian community and surfacing God's kingdom within it. On one hand it's a constant, growing phenomenon. He compares it both to a mustard seed which starts small, but eventually grows into a large bush, and to a small cake of yeast buried in bread dough which in the end leavens the whole batch of flour. But on the other hand, just as weeds always infiltrate the good seed farmers plant in their fields, unwanted elements infiltrate Christian communities. Do we eradicate the invaders now or let God take care of the issue in the future?

Our church, with its history of excommunications, isn't on the same page as Matthew's Jesus. The fear which surfaces here comes from the experience of tearing out the good along with the bad. They're intermingled. One of my favorite tee shirts lists dozens of famous Catholics who, at one time or another, were excommunicated. We can certainly understand why Chicago's Cardinal Stritch denied Catholic burial for Al Capone back in the 40s; but we have a problem with St. Mary MacKillop being excommunicated by her 19<sup>th</sup> century Australian bishop for helping expose a pedophile priest.

Overlooking the implied violence, I can somewhat identify with a Marine Corps bumper sticker I recently glimpsed. "Judgment belongs to God. We just arrange the meeting." Though we'd be grateful if some of those eternal judgment meetings would take place sooner rather than later, we must always remember we're dealing with God's kingdom, not ours. As E J. Dionne recently remarked on NPR, "The proof God is with our church is to see what good it still achieves, considering how badly our leaders handled the sexual abuse scandal." I don't hear today's three sacred authors disagreeing with Dionne.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

JULY 24, 2011: SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR  
I Kings 3:5, 7-12    Romans 8:28-30    Matthew 13:44-52

The late scholar of Wisdom Literature, Roland Murphy, frequently focused on today's I Kings passage to provide us with Scripture's best definition of a "wise" person. When promised a reward from Yahweh, Solomon asks for just one thing: "an understanding heart." According to Fr. Murphy, all followers of God should be on a constant quest to acquire such a heart.

In a recent Bible Today article, Sr. Irene Nowell makes some interesting observations about biblical wisdom. "Genuine wisdom," she writes, "is based on common human experience and the ability to learn from experiences, whether pleasant or painful. ... The goal of wisdom is always life - life in the present, life now. The wise person is someone fully alive. Such a person is indeed a revelation of God."

There's more to Jesus' ministry than just getting us into heaven. We know from Mark's narrative of his encounter with the rich young man that Jesus presumes people were "getting into heaven" before they heard his basic stump speech about the "kingdom of God" (or, in Matthew, the "kingdom of heaven").

Though it often doesn't make our weekend homilies, scholars have been telling us for a long time that Jesus' kingdom of God/heaven doesn't refer to the place we plan to enter after we physically die, but to "God working effectively in our lives right here and now." Jesus came to teach us how to live wisely, in the biblical sense. He was concerned with those who wasted their lives before they reached heaven.

That's why today's gospel pericope is so important. Part of an early collection of kingdom parables, it addresses basic questions: "How do we find it? What's it like? What do I have to do to enter it?" Though the second half of the passage echoes what Matthew's Jesus said last week about being too quick to separate the good from the bad, the first part gives us a profile of the kind of people who eventually surface God working in their lives; individuals constantly searching for deeper, more meaningful experiences.

Notice the aspect of discovery in both parables. First, " — a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all she or he has and buys that field." Then, " . . . a pearl of great price which someone finds (then) goes and sells all one has and buys it."

A searching frame of mind not only seems to be essential, it also appears to be one of the reasons the gospel Jesus rarely interacts with Sadducees. They were the ultra-conservatives of his day and age, members of a religious group who refused to take the faith-steps the more liberal Pharisees had taken years (and even centuries) before. They didn't believe in an afterlife as we know it, denied the existence of angels, and regarded only the first five biblical books as divinely inspired. Believing they already had total truth, they'd stopped searching centuries before. They simply defended the status quo. Rarely would they have spent any time reflecting on their faith experiences. Their understanding hearts had been squelched a long time ago. Why would they be interested in an itinerant preacher who went around talking about the kingdom of God?

In writing to the Roman church about "predestined" individuals, Paul seem to be referring to the traits the historical Jesus presumed in those who accepted his message. He certainly picked his audiences.

Perhaps we, as a church, have been distracted from Jesus' original purpose. We've developed religious disciplines based on penance and self-denial, believing such practices will get us into heaven. Jesus, on the other hand, wanted his followers to develop their searching and discovery skills. He believed "wise" people were better prepared to uncover God's kingdom right here and now, not just get into heaven.

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