

July 19, 2020: SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 12:13, 16-19 Romans 8:26-27 Matthew 13:24-43

One of Ed Hays' best-known stories – in his classic book *Twelve and a Half Keys* – concerns a young man encountering the devil one night on a movie theater parking lot. At first he thinks Satan's there to buy his soul. But the devil quickly assures him he has warehouses full of souls; he doesn't need another one. He's interested in buying his dreams. If he can make that deal, he can change the future of the world.

Fortunately the young man refuses to sell.

But Ed hit on something with which our sacred authors can identify. Once we give up on our dreams, we're giving up on changing our world for the better.

I often remind my students that the early Christian community is more concerned with having the faith of Jesus than in acquiring faith in Jesus. That's a whole new faith ballgame. Both the historical and gospel Jesus' faith is unique; it revolves around transforming our world by giving ourselves for others. If we refuse to make his dreams our dream, we're destined to one day go out of the same world we originally entered. Nothing will have changed for the better because we were part of this world.

The main problem dreamers encounter is time. It constantly whittles away our hopes and plans for a better world. Things just never seem to turn out when and in the way we expect. It's simply a lot easier to eventually "sell" our dreams and go with the flow.

As a priest for over 52 years, I can certainly vouch for that sellout. It was symbolic that on the morning I was ordained in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, I and my family had to weave our way under the scaffolding set up to hold the seats for the Vatican II participants. The dreams generated in that Council undoubtedly became the dreams of the majority of my North American College class of 1965. We envisioned a church quite different from the one in which we were being ordained.

For a while some of those dreams came true. Yet it was always a struggle. Eventually many of my priest brothers felt forced to leave the active ministry in order to realize those dreams. And especially after the 1978 Vatican regime change, most of our dreams were officially plowed under. Getting back to the faith of Jesus was put on the church's back burner. For the sake of our ecclesiastical careers, or just to get some peace in our lives, lots of us mid-60s priests kept our souls, but sold our dreams for less than 30 pieces of silver. The fight just wasn't worth it anymore.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons Matthew's Jesus clicks off three parables about patience in today's gospel pericope. Echoing the Wisdom author's call for hope, Matthew is convinced we Christians are always going to have to deal with weeds in our fields. We're never going to be working in ideal situations or relating to ideal people. Yet no matter our imperfect day and age, we're always to be "righteous" – to constantly build right relationships with God and those around us.

Following Paul's advice to the community in Rome, we have to learn to accept our own weaknesses, confident that God's Spirit always knows who we actually are. Jesus' dreams might be as minute as a mustard seed or a cake of yeast. Yet if we weak ministers of his words and actions abandon those dreams, the next generation of dreamers will have to wait even longer for the world to change.

Who knows what tomorrow will bring for those who continue to dream? I personally never thought I'd live long enough to experience a Pope Francis. Yet

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JULY 26TH, 2020: SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

I Kings 3:5, 7-12 Romans 8:28-30 Matthew 13:44-52

Author and speaker John Shea frequently reminds his audiences that the historical Jesus' ministry revolved around three questions. What do you want out of life? Where do you get it? How much does it cost?

This Galilean carpenter certainly wasn't the first biblical person to get involved with those three topics.

In our I Kings passage, Yahweh asks Solomon what he wants out of life. Surprisingly the king responds, "Give your servant an understanding heart." Should Yahweh have problems with the term, Solomon quickly defines such a heart. It's the ability "to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong."

Scholars who deal with biblical Wisdom Literature – Psalms, Proverbs, etc. – contend that those with understanding hearts are wise in the scriptural sense. They can perceive God at work in their world, and know how they should respond to his/her presence. Three thousand years ago, our sacred authors believed people thought not with their brains, but with their hearts. (Their emotions, on the other hand, originated in their kidneys, not their hearts. That's why, for instance, lovers referred to one another as my "sweet kidney" and gave kidney shaped boxes of chocolates on Valentine's Day.) Truly wise persons have geared their hearts to think the way Yahweh wants and expects them to think.

In some sense, that's how the evangelist Matthew conceives of himself. He actually shares an Alfred Hitchcock moment with us in today's pericope. Just as the famous director suddenly shows up in almost all his movies, so Matthew shows up in his gospel. He's the ". . . scribe instructed in the kingdom of heaven . . . the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old."

As a good Jew, his storeroom of faith overflows with the "old," as a good follower of Jesus, he's also involved with the "new," constantly experiencing the "kingdom of heaven" in his everyday life. Finding the risen Jesus working effectively in all he does and everyone he encounters can only be compared to discovering a buried treasure or coming upon a pearl of great price. Both fulfill the dreams of a lifetime.

Yet even when we eventually surface that "thing" for which we've spent our lives searching, we still have to deal with the price for acquiring it. Paul pulls no punches when it comes to the cost. In today's second reading, he reminds the church in Rome that we have to be ". . . conformed to the image of God's Son." In other words, in order to be "justified," we must become other Christs. That's the only way we can be certain we're doing what God wants us to do, that we actually have an understanding heart. Though we believe "all things work for good for those who love God," that only happens to those who give themselves over to dying and rising with Jesus – the price God demands.

Among other things, that means we have to commit ourselves to working with a "mixed net;" we can't just work with those who, like us, are trying to do what God expects us to do. But we're not only to just work with the "wicked," we're to constantly give ourselves to them. It doesn't matter if our love is returned or rejected, it must always be given. That's part of the cost of conforming ourselves to the image of God's Son.

Obviously paying such a price isn't something we take care of once a lifetime, then forget about it. We not only pay it every day, we discover it changes every day. On the other hand, we also discover a new treasure every day, a constantly changing treasure.

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