

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A
1 Kings 3:5, 7-12
Psalm 119:57, 72, 76-77, 127-128, 129-130
Romans 8: 28-30
Matthew 13:44-52
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I'm sure you've noticed that, on Sundays, the First Reading is chosen with that day's Gospel reading in mind. In our First Reading today, young King Solomon asks God to grant him the gift of "an understanding heart." It seems the Church is inviting us to make Solomon's prayer our own. We are to ask God for an understanding heart to enable us to correctly interpret the parables Jesus shares in the Gospel, and to embrace the wisdom they contain. When we turn to the Gospel, we find a central theme is the spiritual necessity of forsaking the many in favor of the one. When the first fellow, presumably a farm laborer, happens upon a treasure buried in a field, he sells all he has in order to buy the field and make the treasure his own. Similarly, when the merchant in the next parable finds "a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it."

Let's focus on the second parable. First of all, notice that the protagonist isn't a treasure hunter *per se*. He's a merchant. He's a guy trying to make a living. We can identify with that. We too have jobs to do and bills to pay. Much of our time is spent attending to these practical aspects of everyday existence. That's life, and that's fine. Notice too, that the expertise he has developed in the course of practicing his profession enables the merchant to recognize the precious pearl when he sees it. Otherwise the valuable jewel would be wasted on him. It would

be a case of “pearls before swine” (MT 7:6). The implication is that our practical labors have spiritual utility. What we learn about the world in the course of our everyday lives enables us to recognize spiritual treasure when we see it. And when he encounters the pearl, the merchant perceives its value right away. The parable isn’t the story of someone struggling to decide if a pearl is valuable. The profession he has practiced up to that point in his life has given him the “understanding heart” to grasp its worth immediately. We too recognize spiritual treasure when we see it. Oh, we might be able to give a reasoned account of why and how it is precious, but that is secondary. It is after the fact. In the moment, we experience it in our gut. It pierces our heart. We desire it. We love it. We yearn to possess it, much like the merchant wants to own the pearl.

Now we come to the point I want to emphasize. When he finds the precious pearl, everything else in the merchant’s life pales in comparison. Till that moment he was no doubt concerned with whether broaches or earrings would be popular that season. He’d want to have pearls in a variety of price ranges to suit customers of every stripe. None of that matters now. He is filled with the conviction that everything that has gone before, everything he has possessed until now, has only been a means to an end – the possession of this one peerless jewel. Here is the real Wisdom of Solomon – the fruit of an understanding heart.

It is a wisdom we find manifested again and again. The Hebrew people, who have worshipped many Gods, are called to know and to love one God. A man or woman who marries forsakes all others for one beloved. Even a child who visits an animal shelter knows instinctively that there is one special puppy meant for him or her to love.

But in a society that sometimes seems to be losing its eye for spiritual treasure, there is also a countervailing tendency. Where no single choice is valued above all, possession of a variety of choices is often taken to be a value in itself. I once saw a child reduced to tears by the necessity of choosing between two deserts. We can be like that child. When one choice is as good as another, any particular choice can seem like an impoverishment. We fear to choose one for fear of losing the rest. But failing to choose is, of course, itself a choice – a choice that can ultimately drain our life of force, direction and meaning. The possession of an understanding heart spares us this fate. We have found our precious jewel in Christ. Placing him before all else puts our life and its other choices into an entirely new perspective. We are no longer trying to afford our life meaning by keeping our options open. Now all of our other choices can be made joyfully in the knowledge that we already possess what really matters. We have forsaken the many for One. Now, without fear, can base all our subsequent choices on how we may best love God, and the people God sends our way.