

Wednesday of the 17th Week of the Year, II, July 30, 2014 (#403)

My mother told me once that, when she was a girl, she was rolling up a rug to clean a room in her house, and discovered over \$500 underneath. She told her mother, who said that she could keep half of it, with the other half going for the family bills. Imagine coming into that sort of a boon as a teenager in the 1940s! I never did ask her what she did with the money, but I hope that she spent some of it on something special for herself.

Have you even imagined what it would be like to stumble upon some such treasure, like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? Well, Jesus presents that very scenario to us today when he relates the Parable of the Buried Treasure. Here a day laborer is ploughing a field that he does not own, working for someone else. Well, at one point the plough hits something hard, and he digs to remove what he imagines is a rock, only to discover a wooden chest filled with gold and silver coins, along with jewels. Wow! So what does he do? He could just steal it, but he is too honest for that. He could tell the owner what he has found, but he is too prudent for that. No, he reburies it, sells everything he owns to buy the field, and then unearths it legally, thus placing himself on Easy Street. That's the parable today that makes a great deal of sense.

However, there is another parable, one that makes no sense at all, at least at first glance. Here we are dealing, not with a poor day laborer, but with an affluent businessman, one who deals in jewelry. He is currently searching for pearls, perhaps near the seashore, and unexpectedly comes upon another merchant who displays the absolutely finest specimen he has ever seen. It is flawless and beautiful, one of a kind, such as only someone with his extensive experience could appreciate. He knows he will never see another like it again, and so he sells off his entire stock, probably at a bargain to his customers so that it will move fast, and takes the whole amount and buys that pearl. So why does it not make sense? Since he is now out of business: he has no more stock, and no more money, but only a pearl that no one but a connoisseur such as himself could appreciate, so that no one will ever pay him near what it is worth. He just wanted it, to be able to look at it and enjoy its beauty, even if his stomach is grumbling loudly with hunger.

However, it is no accident that these parables are linked by Saint Matthew; and if we look at them more closely, we can see the point Jesus is making. Recall that both are offered by him to try to express what the Kingdom of God is like. The first parable indicates that, if we enter the Kingdom, we will be blessed with treasure beyond our wildest dreams, spiritual graces such as faith hope and love, the Gifts of the Holy Spirit such as wisdom and courage, and the Fruits of the Holy Spirit such as peace and joy. Indeed, the greatest blessing of all is having the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit dwell in our very souls. However, there is a price, as indicated by the second parable, the pearl: if we want this treasure, we need to give back everything else we have.

Or at least be ready to, as our saint tomorrow, Ignatius Loyola, taught. God does not leave us totally bereft of worldly blessings. However, he reserves the right to demand them back at a moment's notice, or over a long period of time. One example is Jeremiah, from whom we heard in our first reading. On the one hand, there is the sense that he knows that, in receiving the Word of God into his life, he is blessed beyond his contemporaries, as he writes, "When I found your words, I devoured them; they became

my joy and the happiness of my heart, because I bore your name, O Lord, God of Hosts,” the name of prophet, a singular blessing in his day. However, there was a price: social ostracism, as his message was unpalatable to his fellows. As he says next, “I did not sit celebrating in the circle of merry-makers; under the weight of your hand I sat alone, because you filled me with indignation. Why is my pain continuous?” Indeed, he complains that even the consolation of God’s presence has now deserted him, so that he compares the Lord to a “treacherous brook” a wadi that flows one minute, and is dry the next. Thus, God has made him a pariah to his own people, and eventually withdrew his own consolations, the price for him to continue to hear his word. True, the prophet regularly complained, so that his very name has entered the English language as a jeremiad, a lengthy self-pitying dialogue with which his book is replete. Indeed, he could even have been the author of our responsory today, Psalm 59, in which we hear, “Rescue me from my enemies, O my God; from my adversaries defend me. Rescue me from evildoers; from bloodthirsty men save me.” However, to his credit, he never abandoned his post as prophet, no matter how difficult, and so attained sanctity, even if kicking and screaming.

Our saint Friday, Alphonsus Liguori, was in a similar boat. He is the founder of the Redemptorist Congregation in 18th-century Italy, a man who became the general of the order, and eventually a bishop. However, there was a price to be paid, starting early, when he gave up a successful law practice to enter the seminary. He chose to focus on work with the poor, such as street kids in Naples – who exist even today – and the rural impoverished, so that all people, not just the socially acceptable, could have the gospel preached to them. However, he was also afflicted with severe arthritis, which crippled him, as seen in a statue at a retreat house in Long Branch, New Jersey run by his order, in which he appears in a wheelchair. However, even that malady wasn’t enough. No, by living so long, to the age of 90, he not only lost control of the community, but was actually thrown-out of the very order he founded. Now that’s spiritual dispossession! However, what made him a saint was that he accepted all this graciously, as a privileged share in the Cross of Christ, thus leading to his canonization. He is a Doctor of the Church, with excellent and enduring writings, such as on how priests should conduct themselves. But his greatest book is his example.

So what about you and me? Sure, we want the goodies: love, peace, joy, wisdom. Of course we want God living inside us. However, are we willing to give up whatever God asks to get them? True, they are graces, free gifts that cannot be earned, and are given through sacraments such as baptism and confirmation. To be more accurate, we may have these gifts, but they may lie dormant, since it is only through suffering that we learn to activate them, and then utilize them well, the way Olympic athletes need to train for years in order to have a shot at the gold. Are we willing to pay that price for this particular pearl, and stand on the victor’s podium in Rio in 2016? Or are we content to sit on the sofa and watch others? Only a handful have the genes and the opportunities for training to get to the Olympics. However, spiritually, we are in that elite: Catholics who have the fullness of the Word of God, and the grace of the sacraments. Are we willing to be relieved of material blessings, so as to refocus our attention on the spiritual? Will we let God take blessings like our health, our job, our family, and our popularity in order to become modern-day prophets and saints? If we focus on the price paid for this pearl, we might shy away, if not in fact run away. But if we choose to meditate on the treasures in

this particular buried chest, we might decide to go for it. Let us be bold, and grasp these spiritual blessings with both hands, so that when we are asked to surrender that last material blessing, our lives, God will not need to pull it from our grasp, but will find that we will relinquish it freely, so that, with empty hands, we can take Jesus' hand in our own and let him lead us to the treasure room of the heavenly palace, where we will have all eternity to sort through items beyond our wildest imagining. In the end, Jesus offers us everything he has; and he only asks that, in return, we give him everything we have.