

17th Sunday 2011
Fr. Robert VerEecke, S.J.

It is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things so that, on our part, we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, long rather than short life, and so in all the rest; desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for us to the end for which we are created.

Those of you familiar with the Spiritual Exercises will most likely recognize these words of St Ignatius from his first Principle and Foundation. I was reminded of them the other day when one of our parishioners quoted them to me. The context of the conversation was his telling me about some of the most recent challenges his family is facing. He said that he and his wife were focusing on the many blessings in their lives and an attitude of gratitude that enabled them to recognize these graces which they would need to give them a discerning heart to be able to face these more recent challenges. It was then that he quoted St. Ignatius words about not preferring riches over poverty, health over sickness, honor rather than obscurity. He said, actually, Fr Bob, what I pray for is wealth, health and notoriety but, in given what we're facing, I'm learning the wisdom of St Ignatius's words. It's kind of like you have to go with the flow. You have to know what really matters.

I have to say that I was surprised by this person's facility with the words of St. Ignatius from the Exercises. I knew he had had a Jesuit education through high school, college and was an active member of a Jesuit parish, but still... I assume that people who have been educated or spiritually formed by Jesuits know the buzz words like "Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam -- For the Greater Glory of God," "the Magis -- the more," finding God in all things. Some people may use the daily Examen but words from the Principle and Foundation? I found that remarkable, especially because on the surface, the response would be "what in the world is Ignatius

talking about? What does Ignatius mean when he says we should be ‘indifferent’? Does it mean that we should have a ‘devil may care’ attitude about what happens?” (Funny expression, devil may care. That’s not what Ignatius would think. Does indifference mean “I could care less?” Absolutely not. St. Ignatius was a passionate person who desired nothing more than to give himself totally to God’s kingdom under the banner of Jesus Christ.)

Today’s scriptures may shed some light on this part of the Principle and Foundation:

When Solomon can ask from God whatever he wants, he does not ask for riches or a long life or victory over his enemies, he asks for a “discerning heart,” a heart that will discern what is right and wrong, a heart that will know how to judge fairly and wisely. A genuinely discerning heart will be able to see beneath the surface, will enable him to judge wisely and not by human appearances. A genuinely discerning heart will help him align his own desires with God’s desires. Ignatian “indifference” is about discerning and making choices that bring us closer to God, the ultimate reason for our existence. Or as Ignatius says, the “end for which we were created.” A discerning heart can help us be genuinely free from having things our way and being open to God’s ways.

The parables of Jesus which we hear today echo this same theme. The kingdom of God is like a treasure buried in a field or a pearl of great price. These are worth “selling all you have” to possess the treasure or the pearl. In the parables, the person who finds the treasure or the pearl of great price invests everything to be able to possess the treasure or the pearl. He/she is passionate about what is of ultimate value: i.e., the kingdom of God. These parables ask us to go beneath the surface, to reject the values of the world that seduce us with promises of fame, fortune and notoriety. They are meant to get us thinking about what really matters, i.e., the end for

which we were created, a closer, more intimate relationship with God who loves us completely and without reservation or condition.

So today, think about what it means to have a discerning heart that sees deeply into the meaning of life and what really matters. Ask for a discerning heart so that you may find the treasure and the pearl of great price that reveals the kingdom of God. I hope and pray that for all of us, like my friend who quoted the text from the Exercises to me, that you may know the genuine internal freedom that comes from the experience of “in-difference”, not at the expense of passionate care and concern for those you love but a genuine freedom that gives you the grace and strength to say “your kingdom come, your will be done.”

In Paul’s letter to the Romans he says, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.” Paul must have had a discerning heart to be able to say that, to be radically free as Ignatius was, as we are invited to be.