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Ordinary 17A
1 Kings 3:5, 7-12
Rom. 8:28-30
Matt. 13:44-46

Solomon prays for the gift of an understanding heart – the gift of a continually discerning heart. St. Paul assures us that God is working in all things for those whose hearts are alive to the gift of God’s love. And Jesus insists that the experience of God’s kingdom taking flesh in our world demands from us a bold, decisive, and single-minded response. These are powerful and appropriate readings for us to hear on this Sunday immediately preceding the feast of St. Ignatius, which we will celebrate this Thursday. These are great readings for the Sunday before Ignatius Day, because in many ways they speak of the experience of God’s love that shapes the spirituality that is the gift of St. Ignatius to all of us.

These readings draw us into the spirit of the deeply Ignatian petition that we presented to God in our opening prayer. In that prayer we asked God to “open our eyes to see [his] hand at work in the splendor of creation [and] in the beauty of human life.” We asked God to help us to see that the world touched by his creating hand is holy. In that prayer we are really standing with Solomon as he asks God to give him an understanding heart. We need continually discerning hearts to see God at work all around us. We need to learn what it is to have a continually discerning heart if we are going to be able to recognize the pearl of great price that we long for when we find it.

New Testament scholar Dan Harrington, of the faculty of BC’s School of Theology and Ministry, tells us that Jesus is using today’s parables of the treasure buried in the field and the pearl of great price to teach us something simple and fundamental

about the kingdom of God: God's kingdom is something of extraordinary value, and our encounter with God's kingdom calls forth from us a single-minded response of total commitment.¹

All of the parables Jesus tells are designed to tease us into creative thought about what the reality of God's kingdom is all about. As we let our minds and hearts wrestle with the parables we've just heard, we need to recognize that God's kingdom is not a place; instead, God's kingdom is God's exercise of loving care over creation and creation's response to God's loving care. In Jesus, in all that Jesus does and says, God's kingdom is given flesh in our midst. Jesus' way of living shows us what a life lived in tune with God's desires for the world looks like. We need continually discerning hearts to recognize the presence of God's kingdom making itself felt in our lives, and we need a single-minded boldness to stake everything on bringing our lives into tune with God's desires for us and our world.

This same dynamic is at work in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, and that dynamic is summed up in the final contemplation of the *Exercises*, the *Contemplation to Attain Love*. In that final exercise, Ignatius invites us to place the following desire before God: we are to ask for interior knowledge of all the great good we have received, so that filled with joy and stirred to deep gratitude, we might be able to love and serve God in all things. It's almost as though Ignatius is inviting us to enter into today's parables to look for the pearl of great price and to see what buried treasure we might stumble across in our lives as we remember God's gifts in our lives with gratitude.

¹ See Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *Three More Parables About God's Kingdom*, AMERICA (July 21-28, 2008) p. 46.

Ignatius then suggests that we remember all the different ways in which God has gifted us, especially by giving us the gift of God's very self. Ignatius invites us to consider how God dwells within all created things, and especially within us human beings. Everything that is, is gift, and everything that is, is a holy gift.² Touched by God's hand, our world is holy. Ignatius next asks us to see God at work in all of creation. In a spirit that echoes the words we heard from St. Paul today, Ignatius wants us to see God laboring in all of creation, working to bring each one of us and our entire world to life and wholeness and freedom. In our lives, God is always already at work in our midst, and the challenge for us is to allow our discerning hearts to see more clearly how God is at work in us and around us. We need to understand how God is laboring, so that we can more fully align our own labors with God's labors in the world. Finally, Ignatius invites to consider how all good things descend from God, just as the rays come down from the sun or the rains fall from the sky. Everything that is, comes from God; everything that is can reveal to us God's presence with us.

When our hearts are open to the treasure of God's presence breaking into our lives, we are called to a single-minded response of grateful boldness and total commitment. When we recognize the pearl of great price for which our hearts long, Ignatius invites us to reflect on ourselves and consider how in reason and justice we ought to respond. He suggests that in our gratitude we make the following offering, a prayer which I suspect many of you know: "Take Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, my entire will – all that I have, all that I possess, all that I

² Much of this discussion of the *Contemplation* is drawn from Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *The Contemplation to Attain Love*, 24 WAY SUPPLEMENT 92-104 (Spring 1975) and Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY AS PROMISE AND PROJECT: REFLECTIONS IN A JESUIT IDIOM* 82-85 (1998); see also Gregory A. Kalscheur, S.J. *Ignatian Spirituality and the Life of the Lawyer: Finding God in All Things – Even in the Ordinary Practice of the Law*, 46 JOURNAL OF CATHOLIC LEGAL STUDIES 7, 18-28 (2007).

am. You have given everything to me, now I return it to you. All is yours. Dispose of it according to your will. Give me only love of yourself, and the gift of your grace, for that is enough for me.”

Each day we can join Solomon in asking God to give us understanding hearts, continually discerning hearts. Each day we can pray that we might be filled with the love and wisdom that we need to look on our lives with attention, and reverence, and devotion. We need to try to find a few minutes each day to ask God to fill us with the light we need to see the ways in which the treasure of his presence lies buried in the events and encounters of our daily lives. We need to strive each day to find the quiet we need to let the privileged moments of our days, the extraordinary pearls of Jesus’ presence with us, reveal themselves to us in the light of God’s love so that we might dwell on them, savor them, cherish them, and, most importantly, say thank you to God for them.

We have all gathered here this morning to say thank you to God, to celebrate Eucharist – we gather as Christ’s body around the table of the Lord in order to give thanks and praise to God for the gift of his life-giving love that brings us wholeness and freedom and joy. In gratitude for all that God has given us, we bring to the table gifts of bread and wine, and they become for us the great gift of the body and blood of Jesus. In that great gift that we receive, in our intimate communion with Jesus, we encounter something of extraordinary value, and that encounter fills us with joy and calls forth from us a single-minded response of total commitment. May God give us discerning hearts, so that our lives might become parables of bold and grateful and faithful response to the treasure we receive in Jesus.