

July 27, 2014 -- 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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First Kings 3:5, 7-12; Psalm 119:57, 72, 76-77, 127-128, 129-130; Romans 8:28-30; Matthew 13:44-52 or 13:44-46

"Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil..." (First Kings 3:7)

If you were able to ask for anything knowing it would be granted, what would it be? Solomon found favor in God's eyes when he asked for, and was granted, wisdom. In these tough economic times, would wisdom be your request?

In the United States we are so used to a world where individual value is somewhat defined by how much money a person earns, or what kind of "stuff" that person owns. But this world is foreign to what Jesus talked about as he discussed with his followers the Kingdom of Heaven— the new world that we as Christians are challenged to build on earth. The parables Jesus shares about God's reign are an entry point to think more deeply about the choices we make in a society where "stuff" (and the acquisition of it) flourishes.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." It seems that in today's world, once the treasure is found, the right to mine what sits under the land (rather than the land itself) is bought or leased so that more extraction can happen. This passage calls to mind the Yellowstone River that flows through one of the United States' national treasures —Yellowstone National Park. In July 2011, the Silvertip pipeline released an estimated 42,000 gallons of crude oil into that river. This disaster, brought to us by the Exxon Mobil Pipeline Company which operates Silvertip, stands as just one example of the countless places around the world where mining for resource like oil, gas, metals and chemicals (to make the energy systems, gadgets and gewgaws that define our way of life) are recklessly disrupting national treasures, people's livelihoods and polluting water systems.

Jesus continues, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all he had and bought it." The ethic of the mainstream economy would have the merchant buying the new pearl on credit — so that he can hold on to the rest of his "stuff" for a while before having to sell anything. Oh, how difficult it is to part with our stuff. In a society defined by credit, we barely pay off one debt before we are in debt again.

Finally, Jesus teaches, "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad." I hardly think that Jesus' parable applies to today's fishing practices where bottom trawling (dragging giant weighted nets along the ocean floor) rips up and destroys ancient coral forests and other ocean life, where as many as four pounds of unwanted, undersized fish are thrown back dead or dying for every one pound of cod, rockfish or shrimp that is brought to market.

For our modern day urban-dwelling society, these parables are extremely hard to understand. In the United States especially, people who live in cities are often unfamiliar with the extraction process that

brings gasoline to fuel pumps or natural gas to stoves and hot water heaters. Precious little thought goes into the source of the metals and minerals that make cell phones and laptop computers. We think little about using credit and accumulating stuff. It is not every day that the origin of food crosses our minds, nor whether it was produced or caught in a safe and sustainable manner.

As a lay missionary in Guatemala in the 1990s, I became aware of the deep understanding that the indigenous people with whom I worked had of these parables. Because their lives and livelihoods were so connected to the earth, they had an incredible awareness of even small changes in their ecological surroundings. National treasures, like the sites of the ancient Mayan ruins, were cherished with awe and reverence. Even the Earth itself was honored before planting with a *Mayahak* (a ritual to feed the earth – offering it food, drink and sweet smelling incense to ask permission for breaking it open and sowing seeds). Mountains, rivers and lakes were thought to have personalities, and they could get angry if humans overstepped their proper relationship with them.

This kind of wisdom is foreign to urban dwellers who are often in positions of power to make decisions about what kind of “development” is needed in isolated rural communities around the world. For many of these decision makers “progress” would be the mechanization and urbanization of these rural areas. But in this process so much culture and wisdom of the natural world would be lost.

What a different world we would live in if we had Solomon’s wisdom today – if we could really understand the parables as Jesus told them to simple people, in touch with the land, and its treasures; in touch with finding and keeping real beauty rather than mindlessly accumulating stuff; and aware of how important it is to take just what is needed and to throw the rest back.

Let us pray today for the wisdom of Solomon – a wisdom that “brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns: Peace, social justice and integrity of creation

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