

## Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 26, 2020

Reflection by Sister Pat Coughlin, OSB, D.Min.

1 KGS 3:5, 7-12; ROM 8:28-30; MT 13:44-52 OR 13:44-46

Today's scriptures present us with a chance to meditate on three themes: wisdom, choice, priorities and the connection among them. Current conditions in the U.S. and around the globe call us to engage all three. People around the world are making hard choices. In the public sphere medical professionals have to make life-or-death decisions daily; politicians need to choose between citizens' safety and the economy; school districts have to prioritize children's education and their health. Media outlets have to choose whether or not to fire employees who engage in speech with racist or stereotyping innuendos. Every day's news is full of reports of environmental disasters made worse by the administration choosing to repeal environmental laws for the sake of fossil fuel industries.

Individual people have choices to make, and these choices affect many others. Do I choose to wear a mask or do I claim that it is my constitutional right to refuse to? Is it OK to go to a bar when I feel lonely and depressed? Can I choose to skip taking an honest look at the racism still within me because it's too uncomfortable? Should I erase the email from the Sierra Club asking people to write their representatives in Washington to urge the passage of environmentally-friendly laws? This is a time of many demands and painful letting go of the lives we have lived up until now and we need all the wisdom we can muster.

Wisdom requires us to step back from a situation and ask what course of action leads to the greater good. Wise people step back from their egos and look what's better for everybody.

That is what Solomon did. His dream challenges us to seek wisdom and self-transcendence. His priority was humility, an understanding heart. He, thus, showed his fitness for high office. He mediated the famous dispute between two lowly, nameless women over who was

the true mother of a baby. He could just have made a final decision without taking time to get to the truth.

Our reading from Matthew's gospel gives us another take on choices and priorities in the three Parables of the Kingdom. These are told to Jesus' disciples only because they had "ears to hear" and "knowledge of the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven" A man is walking through a field and stumbles upon a bump in the earth or a place where the soil has been disturbed. He unearths the treasure and reburies it. Then he buy the field. This is smart, but not too ethical. You can imagine him saying to his neighbors, "Look what I found in my new field." In terms of the parable he has stumbled across the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven. He didn't have to take any courses, engage in a program of prayer, promise to keep a set of rules. He has experienced the hiddenness of the Kingdom and it has changed his life.

The merchant, on the other hand, was a systematic person who was consumed by the hunt. He put everything he had into it. Maybe he traded up pearls he already had which means he had to part with the lesser ones in order to get the most beautiful-or expensive- one of all. He let go of things that were precious to him in order to claim something more important.

Both the treasure and the pearl must have shaped the lives of those who possessed them. And that is what Jesus' parable is about: the Kingdom of God has to be the top priority. That is what should shape your life.

I'm not sure what to say about the final parable, the one about the dragnet. It looks forward to the Last Day of Judgement when the good and bad will be sorted out and the bad consigned to hell. All I know is that it's not our job to sort the fish.

The Kingdom of God is the transforming presence of God in our lives and in our world. We bring it about when we set priorities and make decisions that make God's love and love

for others the priority in our lives and our relationships. Each day we pray, "Thy kingdom come..." When we do this, we are praying for the day when, we can answer Jesus' question "Have you understood all this?" with "Not completely, but every day we try to understand it better."

Pat Coughlin OSB, D. Min.