

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A

1 Kings 3:5, 7-12; Psalm 119; Romans 8:28-30; Matthew 13:44-46.

I remember reading some time ago about a group of teenagers who belonged to the Santa Clara, California Swimming Club. Every morning during the school year they get up at 5:30 and hurry through the chilly air to an outdoor pool. There they swim and train for two solid hours. After a shower and a quick bite to eat it's off to school for them. After school they return to the pool to swim for another two hours. At 5:00 PM they return home, hit the books to get their homework done, eat a late supper, and fall into bed exhausted. The next morning the alarm rings at 5:30, and they start the whole routine all over again.

The article also included interviews with the club members, when one of the girls on the team was asked why she would follow such a disciplined schedule she said: *“My only goal is to make the Olympic team. If going to parties hurts that, then why go? There is no such thing as too much work. The more miles I swim the better. Sacrifice is the thing.”* Pretty darn impressive!

Perhaps had Jesus lived physically with us now rather than centuries ago today's gospel might have been very different. Rather than speak of a pearl merchant who sacrificed all to buy that one great pearl, or a farmer who sold everything he owned in order to buy a field with treasure in it, Jesus might have referred to the Santa Clara swimmer who sacrificed all to make the Olympic swim team.

What is the connection between all three? What do they hold in common? Total commitment to a dream! All three are willing to sacrifice all for the goal they have set for themselves. Thus the point Jesus is really making with today's parables: Citizenship in God's kingdom involves such total commitment on our part. Our belonging to Christ is not like a part-time job or something we pursue as if it were a hobby; we are really being called to give our whole selves to Christ.

Being a Christian, accepting the responsibility of our baptismal call, is like being a pearl merchant looking for the great pearl, or the farmer seeking the treasure buried in the field, or the young swimmer – it involves total dedication and commitment. But there is one big difference; in his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul refers to this difference when he wrote: *“Every athlete in training submits to strict discipline, in order to be crowned with a wreath that will not last: but we do it for one that will last forever.”*

The prize pearl, the farmer’s treasure, the swimmer’s eventual medal, and indeed much of what we pursue in life, is all perishable. At the moment of our death there is only one thing that will count. It is not whether we acquired great wealth, fame, power, or prestige – as good as that all can be – the only thing that will matter is what we have become in the process of pursuing all else.

The Dominican priest/writer, Peter Hunter put the challenge of today’s gospel this way:

“The Kingdom of Heaven itself draws us in. Of course, once we have God’s gifts, they’re truly ours. The treasure belongs to the one who owns the field. The pearl belongs to the man who buys it. Nevertheless, though these gifts of God are free and come to us without our working for them and without deserving them, they’re not cheap. Indeed, when you find the treasure, you have to sell everything you have to buy it. When you come across this great treasure, this ancient newness, you have to give up all the tired dustiness and all the vain inventions in your life, you have to give them all up for the one thing that will give you true joy.”

Nothing in the world may take priority over God's kingdom and our pursuit of it. Again, what really counts in the life of the follower of Christ is not what we have acquired in life but what we have become as we sought to live faithfully our baptismal promises.

Did we learn to love one another?

Did we learn to forgive one another?

Did we learn to reach beyond ourselves to our brothers and sisters in need?

Did we learn to not judge others, to give up our prejudices, and those fears that separate us from those who are different from us or from other cultures and faiths?

Did we learn to encourage the fainthearted?

Did we learn to turn the other cheek?

Did we learn to become more committed and loyal to God, the Church, one another in community?

For years as I drove from my former home in the City of St. Anthony to my last parish, St. Cecilia's in St. Paul, I passed Nativity Lutheran Church on Silver Lake Road taking in every time the weekly sayings on their parish sign board. I would often quote it to the St. C's congregation at homily time. One time it said this, apropos of today's gospel message: *"The best vitamin for a Christian is (be one) B1."*