

## HOMILY - 17th SUN. OF ORDINARY [A] [The Ultimate Prize]

The young 13 year old boy lay in his new bed, unable to sleep. He had just come to a new foster home that day, and his new foster parents seemed nice enough, but – would he ever find a permanent home? Would he ever have a “forever” family? He wrestled with these fears as he finally drifted off to sleep.

That young man is really not so different from all of us. He was searching – looking for what he thought would be the greatest thing he could ever have – a family that totally accepted him and would never force him to leave. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are all searching. Some of us are looking for healing, some for peace, some for love, some for security and some for answers – but we keep looking, hoping one day to find the thing we are looking for – the ultimate prize – something that will bring us everything we could ever have wanted, or so we think.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus makes the bold claim that the number one thing – the ultimate prize of immeasurable worth is – the kingdom of heaven. Many people hearing this Gospel may think to themselves – well that’s a nice idea, but winning the lottery would work a whole lot better. Would it?

Let’s look a little closer at what Jesus is talking about and why he would make such a claim.

First, what exactly is the kingdom of heaven? Is it a place where little angels playing harps flit around all day? Actually, we do not have a virtual picture of the kingdom of heaven, because it is not a place, but a state of being. St. Paul’s wrote that: *Eye has not seen and ear has not heard, nor has it even entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him.* And as he told the Romans in today’s second reading: *All things work for good for those who love God.*

So, the kingdom of heaven must be a situation where every worldly desire has dropped away as not even coming close to the kingdom. Every need we have or could think of will be far surpassed. There will be no anger, no violence, no harm, no hurt, no tears and no fear. It sounds like something we might indeed call the ultimate prize.

It reminds me of when I was a boy at Christmas time. We had a big family, so after supper on Christmas Eve, our parents would tell us all to go wait in their bedroom, since Santa was sure to be coming soon. So, as we waited in their bedroom, soon we would hear some heavy boots stomping around in the living room near the Christmas tree. Then we would hear a little silver bell ringing and a deep voice saying: Merry Christmas! Then, finally we were told to all come into the living room – and of course, we needed no such prodding. We sped around the corner only to stop in astonishment in front of the tree. For there, all piled up, was a pile of wrapped Christmas presents – to us kids, the ultimate prize.

So, how do we go about finding this great pearl – this ultimate prize? Jesus talks about someone finding the treasure or going on a search for it. How can we search for this kingdom of heaven? The first thing is to recognize that nothing the world has to offer is the pearl. Power – being right about any issue – lots of money – a loving and attentive family – all these things will fall away in the end. And, when we think about chasing after these things to have them, we begin to realize that the cost in pain, anxiety and loneliness is more than the gain. The truth is, we cannot make other people do what we want them to do.

The second thing is to remember the prayer our Lord taught us – the Our Father. Part of that prayer goes like this: *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* Here is a clue to finding the kingdom of heaven: to help bring about the kingdom, try to do the will of the Father as was shown by Jesus' actions. Jesus started with *humility* – those who would be first among you shall be the least. Follow this with true daily *gratitude* for the many blessings God gives us. Go on to practice *patience* and *forgiveness*, and we are then much closer to finding the ultimate prize.

The third thing is to recall that no matter how hard we pray or how much money we give to our parish or work at food pantries, we can never earn our way into the kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is pure gift. While we must actively seek it, it is never a matter of building up a spiritual bank account to finally buy heaven. God wants to give us what we need – he wants us to be with him forever.

Our job is small but not always easy – it is to trust that all this is true – that God will provide for us and does love us. Just as we hope in God, so God hopes that one day, we may be with him in the kingdom of heaven. Can we choose the good? Can we humbly put our trust in God and live a life of gratitude? Can we help those in need? The more we do so, the closer we come to the ultimate prize.

Let's say that we have found the great pearl – the ultimate prize. Most of us sitting here today try to be Christian in our approach to life – most of us believe in Jesus and what he taught. So, have we found the great prize? This brings us to the second point – what do we do if we find that pearl of great price? Do we keep it all to ourselves – a sort of “me & Jesus” thing?

The answer is we are to share it – to work to help others to find the kingdom of heaven. We do that first of all by reflecting Jesus and his actions to others. If we are met with a cruel comment or a verbal shot across the bow – we do not return it. Instead, we offer a blessing and prayer to that person.

When we are betrayed or disappointed by someone close – do we seek revenge, or do we turn the other cheek and let it go? What is the stronger action – to fight back, or to say nothing?

When we share the kingdom of heaven by doing what Jesus would have done, we are showing others that there still are decent, kind people in our society. We all so desperately need to see that Christian standards of gentleness, honesty and care for others are still the norm. It may not happen in much of our society today, but it can happen with one person.

When we share the pearl of great price – the ultimate prize, we find we have lost nothing by sharing it. In fact, it turns out we have gained much. We have gained the love and respect of others, and we have done our little bit to spread the Good News. For after all, what is the Good News but that our God loves us and will provide for us? All we have to do is turn to his only Son and follow him. God willing, we will realize the ultimate prize and hear Jesus tell us:

*Well done, good and faithful servant – now enter into my Father's house!*