

## **Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Proper 12**

#### **Year A**

### **Training for the Kingdom of Heaven**

**[RCL:] Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b or Psalm 128;**

**Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

It's rather good for those who preach and those who hear preachers to step back and remember how Jesus communicated with his disciples and the crowds that followed him. Today's appointed Gospel text gives us a wonderful example. As we hear Jesus talking about planting seeds, baking bread, and fishing, we are on familiar ground. Very often, thousands of years seem to get in the way and obscure our ability to hear Jesus in the way those who actually heard his voice absorbed his message. Last week, we were confronted with yokes and oxen. Most Americans have seen neither. However, most of us have planted a seed, if only in a pot. Perhaps not all of us bake bread or fish, but we know people who do. For once, we can hear Jesus with much the same mind as his hearers.

These three illustrations are not quite the same. The first two refer to something tiny and insignificant that grows or expands enormously. One could be trite and merely remark that all good things have tiny beginnings, and this homily, to your relief, would be over.

Perhaps you have noticed that we've omitted two of Jesus' illustrations; they may not be so familiar. They talk of a man who finds hidden treasure in a field and sells everything to buy the field, obviously without telling the owner about the treasure trove. Then there's a jeweler who comes across a costly and rare pearl and sells his entire stock in order to buy it. In both these illustrations, there's an element of renunciation, of divesting everything in order to gain something of enormous value.

Again, the fishing parable has a sting in its tail. It talks about judgment, some final reckoning based on our choice: "The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." As if to finally confuse us, Jesus reveals his meaning in these words: "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

One can see the surprise on the faces of those listening to him. They thought they understood him and indicated that they did. Preachers rarely ask congregations whether they understand a sermon; perhaps that is just as well.

What was a scribe? In a day when most had only the most elementary education, the literate person who made that skill available was highly esteemed. They wrote letters for people and seem to have acted for clients in local courts. Jesus usually presented a rather low view of the scribes, lumping them together with Pharisees. In this parable, Jesus talks about good scribes, just as there were also good Pharisees like Nicodemus and Gamaliel. What, then, is a scribe who has been trained for the Kingdom of Heaven?

This person is someone who has decided to dedicate her or his life to being Kingdom Folk. One of the biggest temptations we confront is to regard our faith as an add-on, a pursuit for our spare time. There's much talk nowadays about "America first." The Gospel dispels such a notion; for Kingdom Folk, God's reign is first. That doesn't mean we are working for a theocracy. The necessary, messy business of politics requires the sort of compromise that, if practiced within the Jesus Movement, invites judgment. Jesus said, "seek first the kingdom of God."

It is so easy for us to put our political and social opinions first and then somehow shape and mold our faith to accommodate these views. In so doing, we quite often enlist Jesus in our passion for that which passes away. Our form of justice becomes God's justice and our form of mercy becomes God's mercy.

We have been called to be those who work for God. We are to work and pray for God in our homes, streets, communities and our nation. We plant little seeds of goodness and mercy and they blossom into visible signs of God's presence. We give up the things that clutter our lives or disguise the fact that we belong to Christ, in order to live into heralding the return of Christ. In the meantime, we fish for people, and in some manner, the way we do this fishing will determine how we will be judged. The Kingdom is yet to come. We can't create it. But we can create communities dedicated to God's mission, places where people selflessly serve each other in serving Christ, so that the watching world may catch a glimpse of what God intends. Is your parish such a community?

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