

17th Sunday OT Year A
July 29-30, 2017

Finding the Pearl of Great Price.

Readings: 1 Kings 3:5, 7-12; Romans 8:28-30; Matthew 13: 44-52

“No Service.” If you asked people twenty years ago what this phrase meant, most likely they might speculate that you were referring to a store that is closed. Or they may make a reference to the occasional sign, “No shoes, no shirt, no service,” a storeowners defiant stand against inappropriately dressed patrons. If you lived in the deep south fifty years ago, such a “No Service” sign might even refer to an painful chapter in American history during which people were refused service based upon the color of their skin.

“No Service.” Today however, most people’s first thought likely would be to their cell phones and the fact that suddenly they were out of cell tower range. Their lifeline is suddenly useless. Today, I wish to call to your attention the value of such a “No Service” sign, recalling the value of at least occasionally being unplugged. I propose to you that it truly can be for you the “pearl of great price.”

I was without television for five days last week, hiking in state parks along the North Shore or on Isle Royale, and occasionally without cell coverage. That itself is not a big deal, and yet, I caught myself on several occasions instinctively reaching for my phone out of a sheer force of habit. Being without these distractions was immensely useful, both spiritually and otherwise.

The wisdom spoken of in today’s first reading was borne of much experience. Solomon was judged wise in the ways of God. The Scriptures tell us that if we frequent the company of the wise, we too will grow in wisdom. When Solomon asked God for wisdom, he modeled great humility for one in authority, truly seeking to think with the mind of God. We must seek the ways of God to find wisdom, and one of the greatest obstacles to that quest is the lack of silence.

I came across a marvelous talk given last week by Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia. Among his many useful nuggets of wisdom was a brief reflection on noise, that's right on noise. He made a passing reference to C. S. Lewis who described hell, simply as noise, a very different description than today's Gospel. Lewis did that in "The Screwtape Letters," a masterful work in which he so simply, yet forcefully outlines the mystery of iniquity and the seductive power of the devil.

But Chaput goes on to say: "...much of the modern life we share we also make hellish, by filling it with discord, confusion and noise. Every day, every one of our choices is a brick in the structure of the heaven or hell we're building for ourselves in the next life," adding "Silence is water in the desert of modern desire."¹ Scripture elides with this insight, as we read in Ecclesiastes (9:17): "The quiet words of the wise are better heeded than the shout of a ruler of fools."

So the obvious question today is simply this: Have we contributed to this state of affairs, wittingly or not? Have we done anything to resist it? And why, I asked myself, did I so instinctively look at my watch, to check the time or my notifications for no apparent reason, though in fact, there was nowhere in particular I had to be?

Just as Elijah finally heard the voice of God, and not in the thunder, but in the whispers, so too we must seek the quiet places, carving out the necessary time alone with the Lord.

If we fail to do so, we all lose. Nor can we fail to seek the wisdom of others. We pastors in the Church need to seek your wisdom on all matters in which you have experience and expertise- and they are many. We'll be members of a healthier and stronger Church for having done so.

¹ "What's next: Catholics, America and a World Made New," by Archbishop Charles Chaput. Talk given at the Napa Institute, July 27, 2017. Reprinted in Catholic Philly

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

“Man participates in the wisdom and goodness of the Creator who gives him mastery over his acts and the ability to govern himself with a view to the true and the good....God's truth is his wisdom, which commands the whole created order and governs the world.”²

Let us seek this wisdom wherever it may be found, especially in the silent depths of our hearts, united in prayer before our loving God.

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph # 1954.