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Sometimes our sacred authors share an “Alfred Hitchcock” moment with us: Just as the famous director suddenly appeared in his movies, they appear in their writings. Matthew does this in today’s Gospel pericope. “Every scribe,” he writes, “who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.” Scholars agree the scribe instructed in the kingdom of heaven is the evangelist.

No one is certain this Gospel writer was actually named Matthew. Proper names weren’t attached to the Gospels until several generations after their composition. Originally, they were written anonymously. But, no matter his name, the author provides us today with a definition of himself and a description of his ministry.

This evangelist’s Gospel is the only one of the four written for Jewish (non-Gentile) Christians. Members of his community could be found in the local synagogue every Sabbath; they religiously circumcised their male children, and probably had never tasted a BLT. They were Jews who accepted the reforms of Jesus of Nazareth. It’s against this background that we must understand the term “scribe.”

First century C.E. Jewish scribes were more than just people who could read and write; they prided themselves on being experts in the 613 laws of Moses, not only

making copies of those unique covenant regulations, but also teaching and commenting on them. Matthew believes he functions in that capacity within his community. Yet, as a follower of the risen Jesus, his ministry goes far beyond just those 613 Sinai laws; he's also rooted in Jesus' insights about the "kingdom of heaven" and its implications. That's why he employs the image of someone who can bring both the "old and the new" from his storeroom. As a Jewish scribe, he's certainly steeped in the old and committed to proclaiming the new.

The \$64,000 question today is, "How does one get instructed in the kingdom of heaven?"

To answer that, one need only go back to the first chapters of Matthew's Gospel. The evangelist describes the beginning of Jesus' public ministry: "From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matthew 4:17). We presume that until this point of his life, the historical Jesus of Nazareth was content to be one of Capernaum's carpenters. But, shortly after a "wilderness experience," he shuttered his shop and started going village to village, synagogue to synagogue, preaching about the kingdom of heaven being near.

We're convinced today that Matthew not only had a scroll of Mark's Gospel on the desk in front of him, but he also redacted and included significant parts in his own Gospel. This quote about the kingdom of heaven is one of those redacted passages. Though he lifted it almost verbatim from Mark, he also redacted, i.e., changed it, to make it agree with his theology. In this case, Mark's Jesus talks about "God's kingdom" being near (Mark 1:14-15); Matthew's Jesus refers to it as the "kingdom of heaven." Most probably Matthew changed God to heaven simply because of his Jewish propensity not to refer to God (or Yahweh) directly. Heaven conveys the same idea Mark was trying to communicate without running the risk of disobeying the second commandment.

According to biblical experts, God's kingdom or the kingdom of heaven refers to God working effectively in our everyday lives. Jesus' basic "stump speech" revolved around one thing: God is present right here and now in everything we do, every person we encounter, every situation we face. We don't have to go to church, say another rosary, attend another bible study, or even think holy, pious thoughts. We can't do anything to make God present. Jesus expects us to do only one thing: Recognize that presence.

That's where repentance comes in. The Greek word for repent used in this context means much more than just being sorry for some evil thing we did and resolving never to do it again. The word *metanoia* implies we've experienced a 180 degree change in our value system. What we once thought important we now regard as insignificant, and vice versa. A true metanoia turns our whole life upside down. We become totally new persons. (That's why, for instance, early Christians believed all our sins we committed before baptism were completely wiped out in baptism. Those sins were committed by a different person, a person who died in the process of his or her metanoia, "sacramentalized" by the dying and rising they experienced in baptism.)

Only those who changed their value systems could actually surface God working in their daily lives. That's why the historical Jesus was forced to use parables when he taught.

Teachers don't employ parables when they're simply adding new information to the information a person already has. Parables come into play only when a teacher is trying to change someone's frame of mind, alter how a person processes all information, or shift an individual's focus on reality. Parables remind students, "You can't get there from here!" In other words, "Unless you acquire a new value system, nothing I'm saying will make any sense to you."

A parable traps you into admitting something on one level that you'd never admit on another level. For instance, today's first two parables — the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price — presume the sky's the limit when we unexpectedly discover something extremely valuable that we could actually own. Everyone agrees: If an individual really wants the treasure or the pearl, he or she would "sell all they have" to acquire it. Only after his audience agrees with the obvious does Jesus spring the trap: Then why wouldn't they sacrifice all they had to acquire the ability of surfacing God working in their daily lives, something much more valuable than the treasure or the pearl?

Yet, it's also important to appreciate Jesus' belief that God actually is present in our daily lives, in the middle of all the good and bad we personally encounter. That's where his third parable comes in. Just as we can't dictate what kind of fish we pull up in a fishing net, so we cannot dictate the content of any given day. We don't have to create or be in an artificial environment for God to be present. No first century Christian would have understood our practice of going off to a monastery or

cloistered convent to experience a “holy” environment. Neither would they have celebrated the Lord’s Supper in the religious confines of a “church.” They lived their faith in whatever surroundings God dealt them, not waiting until they were part of an ideal, loving community before they made their move.

These are the points on which the “scribe ... instructed in the kingdom of heaven” dwelt. As a Jewish teacher, he emphasized the traditional faith of the chosen people and opened the door to a new way of looking at reality. He did more than just relate the well-known salvation history his fellow Israelites had experienced through the centuries; he now zeroed in on how that same salvation was part of his community’s day by day experiences. Just as God had worked in their ancestors’ lives, so God was now working in their lives. This kingdom-trained scribe was constantly bringing the new and the old from his storeroom.

No line of Scripture is more consoling than Paul’s reminder to the Romans that “All things work for good for those who love God.” Of course, the apostle is convinced this doesn’t happen by accident, but only because each of us is “conformed to the image of (God’s) Son” that we’ve bought into Jesus’ faith. We, like Jesus and Paul, experience God and good in our lives because we’ve become a force of God and good in other people’s lives.

For Christians, this is the “understanding heart” that the author of 1 Kings values so highly. Like Solomon, it should be the goal of our lives, infinitely more valuable than wealth or power.

Many of us forget that both the historical and risen Jesus’ preaching didn’t revolve around devotion to his mother, the difference between venial and mortal sin, our obligation to keep specific rules and regulations, or even the kind of assent we’re expected to give papal encyclicals. The late Raymond Brown always insisted that the itinerant preacher we follow never intended to found a church as we know it. This Capernaum carpenter was simply driven to help his followers see things other miss, to make certain we had a proper mixture of the old and the new in our lives.

I KINGS 3:5, 7-12

All my life I’d heard about the “wisdom of Solomon.” But only when I seriously began to study Scripture did I understand the meaning of biblical wisdom. It has nothing to do with winning at Jeopardy or becoming a trivia expert. On the contrary, it’s the

ability to see the things in our lives that God expects us to see. The author of I Kings supplies us with a classic definition. When Solomon, at the beginning of his reign, is asked what he wants from Yahweh, he simply responds, “An understanding heart.”

At the time this passage was written most people believed they thought with their heart, not their mind. The heart didn’t get involved with feelings. (Those were relegated to a person’s kidneys!) So Solomon is basically asking Yahweh for the ability to think the right way: to judge things and people as Yahweh judges them. Quite a task.

ROMANS 8:28-30

Today’s Romans periscope contains one of the most consoling lines in all of Scripture: “We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” Paul uses this entire passage to stress the importance of each individual Christian. He’s certain every one of us is “conformed to the image of (God’s) Son.” No wonder he constantly reminds his communities that we together make up the body of the risen Christ in this world. All of us are other Christs. The only condition for being so privileged is that we love God, and show that love by giving ourselves for those around us. That’s the essential part of the metanoia Jesus expects of his followers. Because of a complete reversal of our value system, we’ve come to believe that to experience good in our lives, we’ve got to become a force of good in other people’s lives.

MATTHEW 13:44-52

In the June 2012 issue of St. Anthony Messenger, I wrote about not appreciating how natural it is to see what we expect to see and nothing more. I stated that all that changed for me after having read Chabris and Simons’ bestselling book *The Invisible Gorilla*. The two psychologists conducted an experiment in which people were instructed to count the number of passes a specific basketball team made. While the passes were taking place, a person dressed in a gorilla outfit walked among the players, at one time even standing in front of them. When the experimental time expired, the people were asked two questions: How many passes did the team make, and, did anyone see the gorilla. Most participants nailed the exact number of passes, but almost no one noticed the gorilla! Though the gorilla was right in front of their eyes, they didn’t see it. It left no doubt that we usually see what we’re

programed to see, not what's actually taking place in front of us.

Scholars like the late Raymond Brown constantly reminded us that the itinerant preacher we follow never intended to found a church as we know it. He certainly wasn't concerned with setting up an institution. The reason he preached was to help his disciples see things others never noticed, not because they were bad people, but because they didn't know what to look for. All of us experience the same reality, but each of us experiences it in different ways.

Matthew believes that, more than anything else, Jesus of Nazareth was concerned with what his followers saw, not with what they knew. As I look back on the "religion classes" of my youth, the emphasis was always on gaining more knowledge. The Baltimore catechism we faithfully used simply got thicker by the year. More pages were added to make certain the older we were as Catholics, the more we knew about Catholicism.

With that knowledge-oriented frame of mind, it bothered me to eventually discover that the historical Jesus never preached to any one community for more than a couple of days. What could they learn in such a short time? I probably knew much more about my faith after just a month of studying my grade school catechism than they'd ever know from such a short period of instruction, especially if a former carpenter from Capernaum was their teacher. I'm no doubt blessed today with much more time and resources to share the old and new with my community than Jesus ever had with any of his communities.

Perhaps some of us preachers must work at changing our own frames of mind. What are we trying to accomplish by the accumulated hours we spend in preparing our homilies and the environment in which they're delivered? Are we content to give our communities only an experience of the institutional church instead of God's kingdom among us? Our sacred Christian authors would certainly contend that if we're not into helping people change their value systems — to see what Jesus helped his followers to see, we're wasting our (and their) time.

Planning: 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's readings place before us the contrast between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. Solomon asks God for "an understanding heart to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong." The psalm continues the contrast, speaking of loving God's commands more than gold.

Paul does not use the word "understanding" or "wisdom," but he says, "For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." Such conformity to the Son certainly involves living by God's wisdom.

In the Gospel, Jesus compares the kingdom to a pearl and a treasure, worth seeking at all costs. That's another strong statement that God's way is better than what the world values.

So what does all this have to do with liturgy? We might ask ourselves just why we gather for worship. It is an expectation and a commandment, though that seems to motivate fewer people these days. But, what is the liturgy supposed to do for us? What are we seeking when we come to church?

For some, of course, it's just habit. For others, it is a comfort, a reassurance of God's care. For some, no doubt, it's insurance against eternal damnation. For some, it offers important social contact.

But, the purpose of the liturgy should be the furtherance of the kingdom of God. That kingdom is not a political system or a nation. The kingdom exists wherever people align their minds and hearts and lives with God, whenever people allow God to reign. That's what the liturgy invites us to do, cajoles us to accept, encourages us to embrace. The liturgy constantly nudges us to change. Isn't that why we really gather — to let God change us, make us better, conform us more fully to the image of Christ?

And how does the liturgy do it? There are many ways. Certainly, the proclamation and preaching of the word of God is crucial. It calls us, challenges us, comforts us and encourages us. That's why planners should be ever vigilant to make sure lectors are well-trained and well-prepared each week. It's why preachers need to devote significant time each week to homily preparation. It's why we need silence before and after each reading and homily so that the word has time to sink in.

The actions that we do also shape us. Singing together unites us, sometimes in spite of ourselves, in one voice. Sharing Communion is all about unity with one another in

Christ, which should be reflected in the Communion song and maintaining a common posture during the procession until all have received.

What other ways can you see the liturgy transforming you and your parish?

Prayers: 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Today's readings give us an opportunity to reflect on what really matters to us in life: what we seek, where we look for it, and whether we will nurture it when it appears. Some of us have clear answers to those questions, and we vigorously pursue what we value. Others are less clear. Regardless of our approach, our search will not be in vain, if we have an open heart.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you taught that God's reign can seem small and hidden: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you told us that God's reign produces a bountiful yield: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to open our hearts to the gifts we are offered: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now for all who seek a world that is good, peaceful and loving.

Minister For the whole church: That we may continue to pursue God's reign and encourage others to seek it ... we pray,

- For those throughout the world whose search for God's reign is overridden by the search for personal safety or survival ... we pray,
- For those whose contribution to God's reign is promoting peace, compassion, justice and integrity... we pray,
- For the environment; for all in the world who depend upon it; and for those who threaten it through policies or personal behavior ... we pray,

- For valuable activities and programs that have been discontinued or endangered because of budget cuts ... we pray,
- For all in this community who need our support and prayers; and for those who have died ... (*names*) ... we pray,

Presider God who offers us a fruitful harvest, we pray for the wisdom and courage to look beyond life's daily distractions and false hopes. Give us eyes that can see and hearts that are open to all that you have promised. Help us to hear and trust what Jesus teaches about your reign. We ask this in his holy name. Amen.

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