

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lately I've been upstairs practicing because our principal organist, Dr. Mario Pearson, asked me to play a piece on the cathedral's annual French Organ Music Festival next month. I enjoy playing music, but preparing for a program reminds me how much work full-time musicians do to perfect their art and play beautifully at the drop of a hat. If I ever catch myself saying of another musician, "I'd give anything to play like that," the proper response is, "Well, probably not because if you would give anything, you'd be practicing a whole lot more than you actually do."

We all invest time in activities we deem important—whether in school, at work, or with the family. But, less honorably, people pass time in other ways—gazing at inappropriate images, visiting unbecoming entertainments, or pursuing silver and gold over relationships. Correcting bad habits is partly a matter of managing one's time, but even more a matter of managing one's will.

Among Jesus' parables, the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price drive home this point. In both cases, the man who makes the discovery sells all he has, buys the object in question, and reaps a return on his investment. Jesus is not giving financial advice here. He's speaking about how we invest in the kingdom of heaven. What are we willing to give for that pearl of great price?

In our responsorial today, we echo these thoughts with several verses from Psalm 119. The entire psalm is the longest in the bible, 176 verses. Even those who pray the Liturgy of the Hours do not sing the entire psalm in one setting: Bits of it spread out over a period of weeks. The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters, so this psalm breaks up into 22 sections of 8 verses, each of which begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet before moving on to the next letter to begin each of the following 8 verses. Every single verse preaches the same theme: God's decrees are wonderful, and following them brings contentment. We sang with great wisdom, "Lord, I love your commands."

Today, instead of presenting a set of eight consecutive verses that begin with the same letter of the alphabet, the lectionary cherrypicks eight verses scattered throughout the psalm with images that prepare us to hear the gospel about the treasure and the pearl. Our cantor sang, "The law from your mouth means more to me than large quantities of silver and gold.... That is why I love your commands more than finest gold, why I rule my life by your precepts, and hate false ways."

When we sing Psalm 119, we are telling God, "I'd give anything to live in accordance with your will." We don't want to hear God respond, "Well, probably not because if you would give anything, you'd be doing my will a whole lot more than you actually do."

One way to discover our true priorities is to chart out how we spend our time and how we spend our money. Look over even the past week for an insight. Most of us will feel pretty good that we spend worthwhile time and money on our values, but we will almost all discover we've compromised these. In reality we probably spend time and money on what is not our true treasure. When we do what God commands, it will be music to his ears.