

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
July 14, 2024 – The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
1 Kings 3:5-12; Matthew 13:44-45; Psalm 85:8
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Two weeks ago, Deacon Mary Elmiger-Jones spoke about her call to the diaconate and her gift and ministry of listening to people at vulnerable and challenging times of their lives. Last week I spoke about my call to the priesthood and a “call within a call” to be a spiritual director or spiritual companion. All of us have a call, a vocation to serve God with the gifts God has given us. But all of us also face the question, “How?” – not once, but often throughout our lives. How do we hear God’s call? How do we decide if it is genuine? These are important questions. Quaker teacher and writer, Parker J. Palmer, encourages us to look within ourselves, to examine our thoughts and feelings, our attractions, our actions and reactions, to learn who we truly are – an essential step in hearing and responding to God’s desire for our lives. As Christian people engaged in discerning what our vocations might be, we can also turn to scripture for help and guidance.

In this morning’s Old Testament reading from the First Book of Kings, we listen in on a conversation between God and young king Solomon, the son of king David, that took place in a dream. (That, in itself, is instructive because dreams can sometimes offer us information about the paths we should take or avoid in life.) Solomon petitions God for what he desires most: “an understanding mind” – which may also be translated as a listening heart – “an understanding mind to govern [God’s] people” and the ability “to discern between good and evil.” God is pleased by Solomon’s request, by his deepest desire. “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word.” Solomon’s deep desire is in line with God’s desire for humanity – that human beings choose good and reject evil – and the first step toward making a good choice is to distinguish between the two. Solomon did not ask for selfish gifts or for revenge on his enemies. He may have desired both – he was human – but he desired other gifts more. God confirmed and granted Solomon’s desire for the ability to “discern what is right.” This is all valuable guidance.

Before we consider our lesson from Matthew’s Gospel, let me highlight something this passage tells us about prayer. We often think of prayer – consciously or unconsciously – as asking God to do what we would like God to do. There is something about reality that we don’t like, so we ask God to change it. In effect, we ask God to “change God’s mind.” But that’s looking at prayer backwards, if you will. When we open our minds and hearts to God, with the proper humility of creature to Creator, we invite God to change us – our hearts, our minds, our behavior that impacts reality. Do you recall Jesus telling his followers, “If you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you” (John 16:23). “In my name” means of the same mind as Christ, that is, when our will aligns with God’s will, as revealed in Christ. Then our prayers will certainly be “answered.” Our call throughout our lives is to conform to God’s dream, to be transformed into the people we were created to be, the children of God made in the likeness of God.

Now let's turn to our lesson from Matthew's Gospel, two brief parables about the kingdom of heaven, what some people call "God's dream." Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." In this parable a man – probably a poor man, since he had to sell everything he owned to purchase one field – stumbles upon a treasure. He wasn't looking for treasure. He was probably plowing, as he did most days, when the blade of the plow struck a jar containing valuables. Totally unexpected treasure found in an ordinary field! For many of us, that is how we find God. We are busy with ordinary life – with work and family, community and church activities – and suddenly God breaks into the ordinariness of our lives. Through human love. In an extraordinary moment of seeing the beauty of the world. Through the kindness of a stranger, the words of a book, the line of a hymn, the bread and wine of the Eucharist, help from an unexpected source in a time of need, in prayer. When we think over our lives, haven't we all been touched by God this way, when we have known in our hearts that the Lord has been at work? When we ponder these moments, we realize how priceless they are.

Jesus said, "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." In this second parable Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to the pearl merchant, who is a seeker, a wealthy man in search of one of the ancient world's most valued objects, fine pearls. He is on a quest. He doesn't find "fine pearls" – plural. He finds one pearl that he values so much that he gives all he has to purchase it. Some of us are seekers like this man. During the years of our lives, we have been searching for what is valuable – for meaning, for answers to our deepest questions, for beauty, for deep human love and connection, for something beyond the limitations of human life. We keep seeking, without finding a final, satisfying answer. We keep looking for that one treasure we will do whatever we need to do to obtain. This parable challenges us to ask ourselves, "what is of ultimate value in our lives?" and "what are we willing to give for what is of ultimate value?" The parable affirms the value of continuing the search. Jesus teaches us that seeking for God is part of the kingdom of God. It is the Holy Spirit within us who is drawing us to seek ever greater closeness with God. We continue our search for God with growing faith in the promise of Jesus, "ask and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Matthew 7:7).

God is calling every one of us to seek God and to serve God. The opening verse of the psalm appointed for today, Psalm 85, verse 8, reminds us how we are to begin to hear God's call: "I will listen to what the Lord God is saying, for he is speaking peace to his faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to him." Do you know that "listen" is an anagram for "silent"? To listen to God, we need silence without and silence within so that we may hear what may be, at first, a faint call. The voice of God will call us to turn our hearts to God, over and over again, in every circumstance of our lives. The voice of God will call us to seek God with ever greater energy and faith. God is that pearl of supreme value we are called search for and, by God's grace, to someday find. In Jesus' name. Amen.