

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 30, 2017

Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year A, Proper 12: 1 Kings 3:5–12; Psalm 119:129–136; Romans 8:26–34;
Matthew 13:31–33, 44–49a*

Let me begin by reminding me and you that, despite the story of King Solomon asking for a sword to be brought when two women came before him with one infant child, each claiming the child as her own, and despite his building of the temple and his great wealth, not only was Solomon not wise, but he was unfaithful. In the First Book of the Kings we read that he had seven hundred wives, who were princesses, and three hundred concubines.¹ And the wives are blamed, of course, for seducing him away from the Lord: “Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites.”² He notoriously oppressed his people, and when his son proclaimed he would follow in his father’s footsteps, he lost all of the kingdom except Judah and Jerusalem.³ If our first lesson were picked because of its relationship to the gospel lesson, I am mystified by the attempt to link Jesus with Solomon.

¹ 1 Kings 11:3.

² 1 Kings 11:5.

³ 1 Kings 12:1–20.

For with Matthew's Jesus, to obey God is what life and eternal life are all about.

Now the gospel lesson as appointed for today is not without its editorial issues. Today is the third week we have been reading parts of the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, but not as Matthew put it together. That means we don't hear the parables in context—and quite honestly, I don't know why this was done. Let me say though, already in this thirteenth chapter of Matthew, the battle lines between the Jewish community and the Jewish Christian community have been drawn. Yet we know from the preaching of John Chrysostom in Antioch in the fourth century A.D. that some Christians were continuing to worship in synagogues⁴—so the lines of other communities may not have been drawn as sharply as the New Testament suggests they were.

Luke's Jesus answers the question, "Who is my neighbor?" by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan;⁵ in Matthew my neighbor is not necessarily my sister or brother. Matthew's Jesus said, "For

⁴ http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/chrysostom_adversus_judaeos_01_homily1.htm, (accessed 30 July 2017).

⁵ Luke 10:25–37.

whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.”⁶ Up until the beginning of the nineteenth century, Christian writers and theologians interpreted Jesus’ words in Matthew, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me,”⁷ as to refer only to how Christians were to treat other Christians.⁸ So when Peter is told by Jesus he is to forgive his brother seventy times seven times, a brother is a fellow believer. In the wake of the tragic and evil history Christians and Jews share, I think we should not edit away the hard stuff. Anti-Judaism is alive and well today.

Now some words about the parables. In the midst of everything else that’s going on in chapter 13, each of these short parables of the kingdom of heaven, the reign of heaven, the sovereign power of heaven—remember in New Testament Greek “kingdom” is a power, not a place—is worth knowing and remembering. These parables have inspired people from the time they were first heard.

⁶ Matthew 12:50.

⁷ Matthew 25:40.

⁸ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 267–74.

One can ask oneself how Christ has grown and is growing in one's life. One can ask what each of our lives has provided for others—in particular for shelter? (Remember that itinerant, wandering, disciples are very much a part of Matthew's world.)⁹

Some commentators get upset about the morality of someone not disclosing what's been found in the field before buying the field. More important for the purpose of the parable was the ability of the finder to recognize the presence of the kingdom of heaven and to value it. My own favorite is the merchant in search of fine pearls, but then he finds one pearl of great value and sells all that he has to possess it.

The most popular Christian education program for children in our church at the present time is something called, "Godly Play." It's actually a knock-off from the formation program we offer here for young children—when we have them: the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Both programs use Montessori materials, things with which children can work and pray, for these parables. In Godly Play, the kingdom materials are all kept in a gold box so the child will

⁹ Ibid., 280.

know what's inside is precious. In the Catechesis, there are no golden boxes. The whole point of the kingdom parables is that its presence does not announce itself with riches or earthly power.

In the Catechesis material a child uses for the parable of the merchant in search of pearls, the pearl of great value must be the same size as all the other pearls in the material. Like the love which a person has for another, love itself cannot be seen, but it is real—and will be known by its fruits.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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