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16th Sunday of Ordinary time

Fr. Dennis Marzan

I'm a 90s kid, and back then, I hated going to thrift stores because I wanted to keep up with the latest fashion trends. Thrift stores weren't the places to find JNCO, Karl Kani, Z. Cavaricci, or Cross Colours. Since my folks didn't have that kind of money, we'd do our clothes shopping at Ross or Mervyns — which were okay — or at the local thrift stores, which were not okay.

But now, I love thrift stores. I love discovering things there, like one of my favorite jackets, which I found at a thrift store in Hayward. It's a reversible satin jacket from St Barnabas School in Alameda. One side is red and the other white. What I love about this jacket is that on the back — on both sides — are the letters D-A-M, my initials. So, naturally, I picked it up.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus also talks about unexpected discoveries. While scoring a sweet jacket from a thrift store can never directly compare to finding buried treasure or a pearl of great price, there is a similar rush of excitement that comes with suddenly encountering something priceless, something amazing.

Amazing is certainly one way to describe the Kingdom of Heaven. It's amazing because it's an upside-down system, where God uses humble, ordinary people to show the world his mighty strength, where true greatness comes from serving others, and where love, not power, is the driving principle. As Jesus tells us, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments." The Greatest Commandment is the closest we have to a manifesto for the Kingdom of Heaven.

When Jesus compares the Kingdom to a buried treasure or a precious pearl, he speaks about the immeasurable value of the living presence of God active among us, constantly at work on our behalf, healing and reconciling a broken world to himself, through Jesus Christ.

And when Jesus speaks of the person who sells everything to get his hands on that field, or the merchant who sells all he has for that pearl, he is talking about those who recognized the Kingdom's power and presence and wanted to become a part of it, even if it meant giving up everything---their riches, their honor, and certainly their pride. And Jesus here is inviting us to consider what great things we are willing to do for the Kingdom.

Because while the Kingdom is here and now, it is also not yet. There is no place where God is not already present and at work, yet it's up to us to make the Kingdom visible here and now.

We don't have to go too far to find examples of men and women who gave up everything for the Kingdom. Just yesterday, we celebrated the feast of the Apostle James, who, along with his brother John, left their father and their business to follow Jesus. "He called them. Immediately, they left their boat and their father and followed him," as we read in Matthew's account, and generations of Christians have certainly imitated James' example of leaving their old lives behind.

But the paradox is, the Kingdom can also be attained through far smaller, more accessible deeds. When we serve meals to our homeless brothers and sisters. When we visit a sick family member or friend in the hospital. When we write or send books to an inmate in prison. When we show up at a funeral for someone with no one to mourn them. These are all ways, as Jesus tells us, of entering the Kingdom, because these are all ways of showing love to our neighbor. And when we show love to our neighbor, we show love to our God who loved us first. Because if God did not love us first, none of us would be here.

So, Jesus shows us that there are many and varied pathways to the Kingdom. While we here are all called to follow Jesus, we're not all meant to follow him in the same way. Some are called to follow him in contemplative life, others in a more active fashion. But in all instances, we need the wisdom to discern and hear Jesus' voice within us, to hear how exactly Jesus invites us into the Kingdom and what he is asking us to do for its sake---for that buried treasure, that pearl of great price, that sweet jacket with your initials on the back.

Okay, maybe not the jacket.

My sisters and brothers, as we enter this new week, let's imitate Solomon, who, in the first reading, asked the Lord for wisdom instead of riches or power. Let's pray for hearts that are so wise and understanding that not only can we distinguish between right and wrong, but we may also see clearly the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, the Kingdom of Heaven present in the here and now. Amen.