

Rev. Toan Do
1 Kings 3:5, 7-12
Romans 8:28-30
Matthew 13:44-52

17TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Epiphany Catholic Church
Louisville, KY, USA
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From 2010 to 2014, when I was teaching in the seminary in a suburb of Milwaukee, I ran into a friend. Not only that, we became friends with one of the former faculty members there; and a couple years later, he retired from teaching. They now live, and moved and live, in Minneapolis, with two of their sons. They are in their 80s. They have three children. The middle one is my age. And the middle one was very talented with music. Already, early on, he entered into many different concerts and contests. By the time he graduated from high school, he was granted a full-ride scholarship to one of the very famous music institutes in Boston, Massachusetts. In his second year, he was sent home because he got into drug addiction.

In the second reading today, I will go back to this story in a little bit, but in the second reading today from Paul's letter to the Romans, in chapter eight, as we know it, 8:28 - 30. If we read it without the whole context, we see that God seemed to predestine certain people or some who will be admitted to heaven; others who will be not. As Paul says here, "For those he foreknew, God foreknew, God also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son. So that Jesus, his son, might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those God predestined, God also called. And those God called, God also justified. And those who got justified, God also glorified. In the late fourth century and early in the fifth century, St. Augustine of Hippo was one of the very famous theologians. He was well educated in Greco-Roman rhetorics. And, out of his conversion, of course, in one of his books, many, many writings called The City of God. In that, Augustine was writing, of course, telling his own story of coming out of his own problems. And he talked about predestination. As if in a sense that God has predestined certain people to be chosen to be God's children; and others, like in the gospel today, in the third parable in which all sort of fish will be put into a net and some will be separated out into a bucket; others will be thrown away. Augustine was reading Paul's letter to the Romans in chapter five, but also very much so in this very passage in chapter 8:28-30. And of course, came up with the whole theory or

theological hypothesis of predestination thanks to the church worldwide and a blessing among many teaching what the church has adopted from Augustine teaching. But the whole teaching or the doctrines of predestination have never been adopted or practiced. Because by doing that, we simply limit God's power to redeem. We limit God's power to save.

Let me just go back as we heard our lector proclaim the second reading so beautifully. Brothers and sisters, Paul says, "We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." As I read this verse before the next two verses about predestination, there is so much freedom and autonomy that each and all of us here are given to choose to love God or to choose not to follow God. And, according to Paul, in his wonderful writing on this letter about theology and God's creation and redemption, Paul really said and focused on those who love God. And it is that choice, that very choice of the person who loves God; God who saves that person regardless of the person's condition.

Back to this friend of mine whose son, middle son, has been battling drug addiction. Now he is in a rehab and living assistance and waiting for the end of life, battling this drug. And you recall last week, I believe in this very mass, I mentioned that illegal drugs or drug traffickers or those who smuggle drugs, I consider the enemies of the people because they prey on the vulnerable. Regardless of the profit, they preyed on those who are innocent. And I've seen so many stories. All of us have seen our relatives or friends who are struggling with drugs. Just also think of those, say, who one time fell into alcoholism. Or more so, more often, some of our relatives and friends who struggle or are dealing with cancer. So, can we say that those who are in AA recovery or struggling, those who are battling with cancer, those who are struggling with drugs, have they been predestined to suffer that much? I do not believe so.

In the first reading, although Jesus tells three different parables for us, but each and every one of the parables in the time of Jesus and into our own time, the very first line according to this parable, for example, the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant, searching for fine pearls. So, the kingdom of heaven in Jesus' own mind and teaching is similar to what the kingdom will be. The kingdom of heaven will be. What Jesus was trying to tell his disciples and us today is that he gives us a warning. He gives us a teaching point so that we may not fall prey or trapped of those things, such as illegal drugs or committing other mortal sins or killing people. But in the end, as Paul says, and also even in Jesus' own view, he tried to compare the kingdom of heaven is like this so that we human beings can learn from examples and

experiences around us and may not fall trapped again. I cannot imagine that God would separate those who struggle in AA, those who are struggling or suffering from cancers of all sorts, and those who are struggling, say with divorce or separation from loved ones or losing loved ones in the family and saying that you have been predestined not to be admitted to the kingdom of heaven. That is not the God from whom I receive and learn from Jesus. That is not the God whom I believe and put my trust in.

The God whom I believe and trust is the one through Jesus as we see. Jesus has taught his disciples the difference between the kingdom of heaven that is now. For us, there is a tension of the already now and the not yet. For all of us here to see the struggles through human weaknesses, we should search for something more precious. And that something more precious is something that is not yet to happen. But it is something that is hopeful. That is something that is eternal. And it is like the merchant or like the farmer who sells everything in this world to wait and hope for that precious thing. It is those, it is you, it is I and all of us here. Those who love God, God will be there to redeem our weaknesses, to save us from the evil or the bad things of this world. Those who love God, God will put aside regardless of their state of human conditions.

The first reading today from the first Book of Kings, this very passage we learn and listen to every now and then, and very famous for Solomon who asked for nothing but an understanding heart so that he could judge the people and all of the matters under his responsibility to separate the good from the bad. And this request from Solomon also reminds us of when we are in need of help, when we are weak, God is always there for us. Solomon received the wisdom from God to be one of the greatest kings in our Judeo-Christian religion. For example, the first temple was built by Solomon that lasted for several hundred years until the time in which the Babylonian armies destroyed it. And the temple was for Jewish people, for these hundreds of years, the place where they came together and worshipped God.

Paul, writing to the Roman Christians, reminding them that as long as God is on their side, as long as God is in their heart, as long as God is in their mind, God will save them. God will redeem them from their human conditions. Jesus also tells us that it is like in the end, at the end of the age, in which the angel will come to separate the evil ones of this world from the righteous ones. We have been called. We have been given this very gift of asking God to save us and to redeem us.