

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A
[Greg Kandra](#)

Lectionary 109:

I Kgs 3:5, 7-12
Ps 119:57, 72, 76-77, 127-128, 129-130,
Rom 8:28-30
Matt 13:44-52

Possible preaching themes:

- The greatest gift: understanding and empathy (connected to 1 Kings)
- The joy of finding unexpected treasure (related to 1 Kings and the Gospel)
- Encountering the kingdom of heaven in ordinary life — discovering the extraordinary in the ordinary, often by accident (from the Gospel)

Possible scientific resources:

- **Empathy**
 - How do we come to have empathy and understand others? Neuroscientists say there is a mechanism that makes it possible. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780123741769000178?utm_source=pocket_reader
 - A readable and accessible article looks at the psychology of empathy. <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/neuroscience-empathy>
- **Searching and discovery**
 - How curiosity has led to groundbreaking new medications <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/04/most-transformative-meds-originate-in-curiosity-driven-science-evidence-says/>
 - A blog post reminds readers that some of the greatest scientific breakthroughs happened by accident. <https://www.mynewlab.com/blog/accidental-scientific-discoveries-and-breakthroughs/>
- **Wonder and awe**
 - A key part of our mental health, researchers say, is continuing to embrace wonder and awe. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/03/well/live/awe-wonder-dacher-keltner.html>

- This longer white paper [45 pages] present an extensive yet accessible overview of recent studies that explore awe empirically
https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-JTF_White_Paper-Awe_FINAL.pdf

Homily outline combining resources: The Kingdom of God is a thing of astonishment and joy, waiting to be discovered — and closer than we may realize

I. Introduction: Pondering the kingdom of God

- Jesus sets out to explain the Kingdom of God to his disciples in today’s gospel.
- He offers an extended series of similes built around the idea of discovery:
 - the kingdom is like a treasure found in a field;
 - it is like a merchant who discovers a fine pearl;
 - it is like a net thrown into the sea that catches all kinds of fish.
- The prevailing message is that the kingdom is something both commonplace and rare — familiar yet surprising, filling the heart with joy when it is encountered.
- He elaborates further, explaining that “every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven” is like one who “brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.”
- Jesus is suggesting here that the kingdom is something both ancient and new — both expected and unexpected – to be discovered and redefined by the disciples who are hearing these words.

II. The scientific turn

- One of the recurring themes in this gospel is the idea of discovery. The kingdom is found, perhaps, when least expected — and yields riches beyond imagining.
- The scientific world is riddled with breakthroughs caused by happy accidents. Throughout history, some of the most important scientific discoveries have happened by accident or coincidence, such as
 - penicillin
 - plastic
 - and the microwave.
- Researchers have found that we are, by nature, people on a quest. Our brains are wired to help us find what we seek. We search, we question, we dialogue with one another, all to discover what we are looking for.
- The result of all this searching and discovery can reenforce a sense of awe and wonder. Scientists say being aware of wonder has emotional, psychological and even spiritual benefits.

III. Christ’s message to his disciples

- In this fairly short passage, Jesus offers images of the kingdom that are both familiar and surprising — which is his point.
- He also suggests that finding the kingdom takes some effort.

- “Seek and you shall find,” in some ways, is a kind of thesis statement for this lesson.
- It’s interesting to note that in this passage, Jesus uses a series of similes or comparisons that would resonate with his particular audience:
 - someone digging up a treasure in a field,
 - a merchant looking for a pearl,
 - a fisherman tossing a net into the sea.
- To modern listeners, they may seem antiquated or quaint.
- But to the people of his day, Jesus was offering an astonishing idea: the kingdom is closer than you may realize.
 - It is accessible to anyone with (so to speak) a shovel, a net or the desire to find something of value.
 - All you need to do is dig, cast or look.

IV. The Takeaway: Seeking and finding the kingdom around us

- All of us, in many ways, are people on a quest — seeking things of quantifiable value, such as more stylish clothing, a better car or a higher paying job.
- Often we are further motivated to pursue more immeasurable values, such as dignity, self-worth, purpose, satisfaction, peace of mind, joy or love.
- In this gospel, Jesus reveals that what we truly treasure is found in the kingdom of God, and it is closer than we may realize.
- Jesus drives home the idea that the kingdom is not a place, or a destination, or a geographical point on the map.
 - Rather, it is a way of living and loving:
 - what the early followers of Jesus would call “The Way.”
- The disciples were taught that this kingdom was something both familiar and surprising, and that discovering it would fill their hearts with unexpected joy.
- All of us may be seeking to find the kingdom in our lives. Where do we find it?

Litmus test

- Everything we seek does not always lead us to the kingdom revealed in Jesus.
- Thus, we need some guidance for discerning what is of passing value and what is that pearl of great price.
- The first reading gives us something of that litmus test
 - Solomon did not act in his self-interest
 - He did not ask for earthly riches
 - Nor did he seek revenge or violence on enemies.
 - Rather, he asks for an understanding heart.
- God’s understanding heart is fully revealed in Jesus’ own sacred heart
 - A heart that communicated love for the stranger
 - respect for the marginalized
 - and justice for the outcasts.
- Today we also pray for understanding hearts, that together we too might further God’s reign in our lives and in the world.

Tags: awe, curiosity, kingdom, psychology

About the Preaching with the Sciences Initiative

A primary way Roman Catholics explore their faith and nourish their spirituality is by participating in Sunday Mass and actively engaging in the homily. However, few preachers explicitly connect faith or spirituality with science. The Preaching with the Sciences initiative, made possible by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation, gathers scientists and leading homileticians to explore the positive contributions science can make to preaching, and consequently contribute to more contemporary modes of believing. Such contributions are grounded in the rich imaginations that scientists bring to their work as well as in scientific discoveries that have a potential for revealing religious truths and even shedding new insight on ancient teachings and beliefs.

With guidance from world-renowned scientists with differing areas of expertise, a select number of homileticians will draft homily outlines for preaching key Sundays and feast days across the 3-year lectionary cycle. Over 100 homily outlines will highlight some of the way's sciences and the contemporary search for religious meaning can interface. These free homiletic resources have the potential to influence thousands of preachers seeking help each week in crafting sermons and helping to shape a scientifically informed religious imagination among future preachers.