

Homily072620

## DISCOVERING LONG BURIED AND UNEXPECTED TREASURE

I want to tell you a true story.

In May 2018 a longtime parishioner died after a series of illnesses. She had not lived in the parish for several years but had been in a variety of different Nursing Home and Retirement situations. Over the years she had asked that she be allowed to be buried from Saint Anthony's when she died and we always try to honor such requests. She had been a widow for over twenty-five years and her only other relative was an adopted child with whom there had not been contact for many years.

One of our local Funeral Directors was asked by the woman's Financial Assistant to make arrangements with us for her funeral. In the course of making arrangements the Funeral Director learned that the deceased had said that she had a will and that she had entrusted it to me. This was news to me. I had no memory of such a will and looked in the parish files but was unable to find anything there.

Her death was right around the time that we were making the transition from the old Rectory into the new Rectory. I had to go through all of my possessions and all my official papers as pastor and separate them into what was moving to the new Rectory and what was moving into my new office in the Pastoral Center. In the course of doing this assessment I came across my own metal lockbox with my personal papers—my Last Will and Testament, Advanced Directive, Cemetery Plot deed, etc. I was just going to label it to be moved to the new Rectory when I opened it and looked inside. There, to my surprise, was the woman's will. I had no idea I had such a document.

I opened the envelope. There was a single sheet of paper inside, torn out of a copybook. Written on the lined pages was her Last Will and Testament. It was written in ballpoint ink and consisted of three things:

- 1) I leave all my possessions to c/o Saint Anthony parish Father Stephen McHenry
- 2) I direct that all my bills be paid off from my estate.
- 3) I direct that no one is to contest this will.

The will had been notarized and witnessed by two different people, signed and dated. It had been given to me in **April 1994**. I forwarded the will to the attorney for the estate and after some weeks he indicated that the will I had, even though twenty-five years old, was the only surviving will and it had been lawfully promulgated even though hand-written.

The attorney said that in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania there is a 15% inheritance tax that would need to be paid from the estate. I mentioned that parishes are tax exempt. He said; "She didn't leave it to the parish; she left it to you." I said: "No she didn't. I read it." He said: "Go back and read it again." "I leave any and all proceeds of my estate to Rev. Stephen McHenry, Pastor." Is what it says. "Now, right after the word TO she drew a line and on the line above your name she wrote c/o Saint Anthony Parish." "But she meant to leave it to the parish. She could not possibly have meant to leave her whole estate to me. I was still the new pastor here for about two years when she gave me the will. She had known Msgr. Sullivan and Saint Anthony's for over twenty years. I am sure she was leaving it to the parish."

"Well, you may be right, Father but as the Attorney of Record I have to give my account of how I read the will and your name is the name on the same line. Whatever her intent, the words say it is for you. And that is what I have to say to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania when I file the claim" "What would it take to have the alternate reading accepted?" "Well, I can file an appeal for an alternate reading of the will naming the parish as the recipient but the State Attorney General's Office has to sign off on that. It will cost some money to file such an appeal but if that is what you want I will do it. But just a heads up, Father. The Commonwealth may not go along because if the money goes to you they get their fifteen percent. If it goes to the parish they get nothing. And it's their call. But I'll put everything in motion." I thanked him.

In the middle of June 2019, we received word of the verdict that the State of Pennsylvania had accepted the alternate reading and there was a check to the parish totaling just over \$110,000. Needless to say that was a great blessing upon our parish. It was especially important that past year because we were very strapped for cash much of

the year and were actually only able to pay all our bills by using about \$70,000 of those dollars. Isn't that a great story?

Remember the timeline. It was 2018. She gave me that will in 1994. The Lord knew that will existed way before our fire and our new church and the closing of our school and the opening of our Child Care Center. The Lord knew this would be a lean year for our parish and we would definitely have finished in the red without this great gift. The Lord prompted her to act and that will became a sort of buried treasure for the parish. The Lord opened my eyes, the eyes of my heart, so that I could recognize that little buried treasure left to the parish. I did what I needed to do to obtain that buried treasure for the parish.

But here is the point. The parables about the buried treasure and the pearl of great price are not about acquiring wealth. They really are not about the money. They are not about doing everything in your power to get more financial resources. The parables are about recognizing what is important, really important. The parables are about making the right decision about important things. So, Yesterday I received two emails from two different families. Both asked to become part of the parish. Both have been away from the practice of the faith for a number of years. Both want to know what they have to do to have their children, of school age, baptized. What would it take to have their marriage blessed? Both families have been affected by the pandemic. Both have come to a realization that something very important is missing in their lives and the life of their families. Both families, in a sense, have decided to obtain the field that contains the buried treasure. It is buried treasure but it has nothing to do with money. My friends, God's grace is at work. The Holy Spirit has been poured out. Pray for the grace that the Lord will open the eyes of your heart and the eyes of the hearts of those you love—to recognize that which is the authentic treasure in this life—and to seek it. Every day people are recognizing just how worth it our Catholic faith in Jesus Christ truly is.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.