

“YOU ARE THE PEARL!”

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

Text: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

You are the pearl. You are not the merchant, you are the pearl.

I want you to receive in full what God wants me to give you this morning, which is to say: good news. And that good news is present in all six images in today's gospel reading, but especially in the parable of the ridiculously happy merchant and the pearl of infinite value.

The thrust of this parable about the kingdom of heaven, also known as the kingdom of God, is: somebody pays an enormous price to possess something he truly wants.

Most commentaries and most preachers interpret the parable as though it is an instructive parable. Jesus is telling us we must surrender what we value, we must make tremendous sacrifices, give up all our other pearls, in order to possess the pearl of great price, which is: entry into the kingdom of heaven. Even our Prayer of the Day supports that interpretation of the parable of the pearl merchant.

I beg to differ.

This parable is not about our love, it is about God's love. Jesus did not tell this parable to make us feel bad for holding on to people and things and places we love. He was not trying to talk us out of our money and our friends and all we desire.

He is telling us about God's love. His parable is a little sketch which shows dramatically how God feels about people who love him.

God created this world in love. God created us in love. God created us to live in love. In love with God, and in love with one another. The whole Bible is a touching, and sometimes quite tense, love story.

Like any love story, it is full of drama. Because there always seems to be somebody not getting the idea. Someone not falling in love. Someone oblivious. Someone's love is growing cold. Someone is drifting away.

On vacation, Christine and I went on many long walks in Switzerland, Austria, and Germany, with people we love. And walks are for talking. It is amazing how often the conversation was of love, either directly or indirectly. Love of people, love of places, love of nature, love of life. Love, as well as the difficulties of all our loves. That's all the detail I will give you, it's way too intimate, but you know how it is. Love is the greatest topic of all.

The “kingdom of heaven” exists where there is the fellowship of love between a God who loves his people into being, and a people who love God back. People who serve God not out of obligation but out of love for God. (Often, we refer to “loving God back” as “faith,” but it's the same thing.)

Jesus' reason for being was to repair the bonds of God with God's people, to restore heaven to people and people to heaven, to stop wars and wipe away tears. Not an easy job. Lots of drudgery in that job. You walk around and you peer into people's hearts, looking for “love of God”—faith. And you find a lot of cold hearts. A lot of people who are living for

other purposes than love, or whose love is spent entirely on themselves.

Then, you find it! Eureka!

That is the joy of the pearl merchant, upon finding faith. Upon finding a people who want to love and be loved by God.

You find it in funny places, was Jesus' experience. A tax collector sitting on a tree branch. A healed leper. Outcasts often had it. He found faith in a thief who was nailed to a cross. And when you find it, if you are God, you are like the shepherd who finds the one lost sheep and throws a party for his neighbors he is so glad.

The gladness of the treasure-finder and the happiness of the pearl merchant are the joy of God rejoicing over having recovered our love. Glad, when we return like the prodigal Son from wandering around. The joy of God. In us.

But it is a little more specific than this. God loves us all, we are sure of that. God's love is for everyone. But the gladness of these two parables is the joy of God when his love is returned by us who love God. Then you have it, the kingdom of heaven. Until then, God is in pursuit of us, sending his Son, trying to restore creation by re-breathing his Holy Spirit into love corpses.

So, yes, you are the pearl. When you love God you are the pearl. And loving God, as Jesus shows in all his ministry, does not consist in proving your love to God by what you do or say. Love for God, like any other love, is not forced. For us who have not loved God as we ought, the beginning of loving God is to repent of that, and to receive God's forgiveness for our lovelessness.

You are the pearl, not the merchant. In the great love story of the Bible, God is the one whose love is constant. People are the ones whose love is ragged, or cold, or gone. We need to be restored. And we are not restored to a relationship of love with God

by acting like we love God, by performing certain acts or saying specific things, but through coming to love the One who demonstrates his love for us in Jesus Christ. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life," which is to say, should not perish as we are but should come into the warm community of faith and love which Jesus forms as his body, knowing God and loving God. "Greater love has no one than this, to give his life for his friends" is why the God who is love gave himself for us.

Does it make any difference whether you agree with my particular interpretation of this parable of Jesus, or with the interpretation of the majority of readers? Not really. But it makes all the difference in the world where we situate ourselves in the love story between us and God. If we picture ourselves always trying to win God's love, as though God were the indifferent one, we are being foolish. For we know from Jesus' testimony and example that it is God whose love seeks to awaken our love, so that the world can be saved.

(This is why we don't spend a lot of our breath on saints or heroes of faith, as though they by their sacrifices of love could inspire us to be similar to them. We are not called to heroic love, but to love a God who loves us heroically.)

One last time: you are not the merchant, you are the . . . pearl. The merchant is God, who paid a ridiculous price—his only-begotten Son—to possess us, so that we might live under him in his kingdom. You with your faith are the pearl God is happy to own.

Amen.