

The Precious Pearl

Sermon preached by the Rev. Catherine Powell, Church of the Servant, July 27, 2008

Text: Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant buying and selling fine pearls. When he finds one that is more precious than the others, he sells all that he has and buys it”. *Matt. 13:45-46*

Two weeks ago I reported to you that I had discovered Airlie Gardens and those beautiful oaks—as well as Wrightsville Beach and the miracle of the multiplication of the cars (to fill all the parking spaces). I just want to keep you up to date so, in the last two weeks I have visited Jackson’s Big Oak Bar-B-Que and, for breakfast, Jimbo’s. Excellent. Yesterday I ventured somewhere new. Now, as an almost-new-homeowner, I might have needed some warning about this. I went into—The Ivy Cottage. It is the mother of all consignment shops. It has great items and it is HUGE and hugely tempting!

All our Bible readings today are well worth thought and conversation. I am going to speak about one of the gospel parables. Many of you already know that parables are a special kind of teaching story. They are not like fables with a set “moral” at the end. They are not allegories in which each item stands for something else. They always use simple, everyday items—no wizards or space ships. And they are open-ended, designed to get you to think about something. They often end with a question: “Now which of these two did the Father’s will?” or “Which of these was the man’s neighbor?” Parables’ open-endedness invites us to consider different facets of the truth.

The parable of the merchant and the pearl is a classic example. It is a brief story. There is a merchant buying and selling pearls. I picture him leaving his home and going out into the marketplace examining wares, trading, exchanging coins. He travels here and there. He brings boxes and baskets home. He pays for this. He charges for that. And then he finds that one, special pearl. He takes everything he has—every box, every basket, every bag—and sells them all. At the end of the story we see him standing, hand out, gazing at the one pearl he holds. The precious pearl.

I told this parable to some fifth-graders. I said, “I wonder who that pearl merchant is? Is he like the jewelers we see at the mall? ...I wonder about the pearl, too. What is that pearl?” The fifth-graders pretty much all agreed that *we* were the merchant. Each of us was searching. The ones who didn’t have a church background said, “The pearl is a good education. That’s what we are trying to get.” Others said it was friendship. The girls who realized that they were in religion class gave more predictable answers: the pearl is God; it’s heaven. And this understanding of the parable is on target. *We are* all searching. For our purpose in life. For harmony with who we are and who God wants us to be. For vocation. For faith. We try living this way, then that way. We take a class. We read a book. We search. It is as if we are born hungry for wholeness, hungry for what we will only find when we find God. Our search is worthy and blessed by God.

But there’s a second way to look at the parable. At the start of the story, the man is very busy. He goes here. He goes there. He searches. He spends. He trades. He travels. At the

end of the story, he is no longer in motion. He is still. There is a deep spiritual truth in realizing that we don't have to be in motion; we already have what we most need. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is among you." Perhaps our busy-ness, our restless activity, keeps us from knowing what we hold in our hands. There's a saying in 12-step programs. Rather than "Don't just sit there, do something!" it goes "Don't just do something, sit there."

For the last couple of years I taught a meditation and mindfulness class. My co-leader reminded the group again and again. "What's important is not rehashing what has already happened. Nor is it rehearsing what will happen in the future. What's important is this present moment." When we stood in a long line for walking meditation she would ask, "Now what is walking meditation?" And the class would respond, "Being *aware* that you are walking." Who knows if the pearl the man held at the end what really very different from the others. Perhaps it was his awareness of it that opened his eyes to its beauty. God's love and acceptance are already here.

A third way to understand the parable came from a 4-year old. I had told this story to a preschool group, moving wooden figures. The little wooden merchant left his doll-sized house and returned to it with a basket of pearls hooked over his arm. He did this several times. Then he found the special pearl, a single one glued to a small shell. At that point he moved back to his house and removed everything he had there, going home at last with the single pearl. After the story I said, "I wonder about that merchant. I wonder who he could be. And I wonder about the pearl." A small voice spoke up, "Oh, we, we are the pearls. God is so happy to find us."

We are so precious to God. God goes out and searches for us. And when we are found, God holds us and gazes at us in love. I went online earlier this week to see what the online sermon-advice sites had to say. One of them quoted the Bishop of Massachusetts, Tom Shaw, giving the same message. He said that we were precious to God and that God was deeply grateful for all the little things we do. God was so thankful for the courage and generosity precious human beings show. I thought of that this week when I saw so many people helping Susan move, and heard their stories of how much she has given this community. And we have Riley and Jan with us today. I have heard again and again how much each of them gave to the church as warden, as vestry members, as coordinator of college ministries, as friends. And this theme of generous love shows up again and again. Many of you have talked with me in recent weeks, telling me some of the stories of Church of the Servant. You have mentioned getting through hard times together. The desire to be loving family to one another is obvious. God must be so, so grateful. Tom Shaw recommended that we take time each and every day to sit down with God so that God can thank us.

The sermon writer who quoted Tom, whose last name, I believe, was Kubicek, remarked that like the merchant in the story who gave everything to get the pearl, God was willing to give everything. God gave everything—his Son—in order to bring each precious person close. May the parable of the precious pearl—the image of our search and of God's gratitude and love—be a blessing to you this week.