

July 27 2014

Scripture Lessons ~

Psalm 105:1-11

Romans 8:26-39

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Sermon *Seeking the Pearl of Great Price*

I don't have to tell you that one of the difficult task of the pastor or Sunday School teacher or any church leader really is to convince other people that you come in to contact with, that the Good News of the love of God and Jesus Christ is just as fresh and just as valid for those of us who live in this 21st century in the United States as it was for those first people living in the first century Palestine. Now most of us who call ourselves Christians, I think, will agree that what Jesus did, and what Jesus taught were all of central importance. But many of us can some times be at a loss when it comes to allowing those teachings to have a practical daily impact on any one of the attitudes or prejudices or behavior that has become so much a part of our everyday living; that is where the hard part comes in. Many ways it becomes easier to become a sort of nominal Christian, a Christian in name only. As our planet gets smaller and our exposures to larger world and other beliefs systems become much greater. Of course it becomes necessary part of our faith to keep that word necessary and, I will repeat that word necessary, our citizenship to respect the beliefs of other people. In exploring some of these other traditions can be a very rewarding experience, I had a chance to do some of that when I was in college and seminary. Nevertheless it tends to be tempting to fall into a kind of lazy sort of what I would call, civil religion where we pick and choose the things that are convenient and comfortable from the beliefs of other religions, or philosophies, or political movements and ignore those more demanding aspects in our own Christian faith.

The parable of the merchant and the pearl of great price from today's Gospel lesson, then sort come for us as Christians what is the most important of all of Jesus parables. As with any parable we invited to see ourselves reflected in the actions of least one of the characters in the story. How many characters do we have ? It is not a trick question. Who said one? You are right, there is only one character. Who is the character? It's the merchant. And so we are encouraged and I want you to kind of do that as we walk along. We sort of step in the merchant's shoes, our shoes, and consider the choices that the merchant has. Obviously, as we read this tiny snippet from scripture we know that this merchant is a seeker. And as you well know, that word has become pretty popular one in our time.

It seems as the world becomes a more complicated and stressful place, each of us seeks after something that seems to be lacking in our lives during the course of the day. If nothing else we all claim to be seeking peace. We all claim to be seeking truth. We claim to be seeking Jesus. And if we are like the merchant who, after all, is not just looking for something mundane as a better mouse trap or a more efficient cheese grater, but instead for something of ultimate worth represented in the parable of buying fine pearls. We also assume as listeners that he has been searching in a lot of different places, among many markets maybe, checking with other merchants returning from the Far East or from trading exhibitions all around the Mediterranean regions. Maybe he has been asking around amongst his close friends and acquaintances, but one thing is for sure he hasn't been looking in just one single place, nor has he been limiting himself to only single source.

Like the merchant, many of us seek in many different places during the course of life. In common with him we probably own a lot of fine pearls, perhaps pieces of eastern or western thought, things from sacred scriptures, or from secular philosophies. Perhaps a few pearls in common thinking from our parents or our grandparents or pastors or teachers. We may have learned various ways of attaining inner peace inside, maybe a little yoga or aerobic exercises, maybe some relaxation techniques or experimentation with all kinds of prayer and meditation style; might also include found the beauty found in all the wonderful relationships that we take part during the course of life. Or in fine art, or fine music, or service to other people, or commitment to a number of worthy causes in the world. But for all of these things very few of us have stopped seeking. However wondrous the fine pearls we already own, we still continue to search in life. But the question is "What are we searching for?"

If we believe that all beautiful, all truth, all wisdom is of equal value, why we are still devoting so much of our energy day by day being those kinds of seekers? Why are so few of us are happy in this world? Why are so few of us are at peace or content with what we have in life? Well, I am not up here for nothing- I have a suggestion to make because, I think, we are still looking for that pearl of greatest value, and until we find that pearl of greatest value, we will be forever be aware of a small sense of emptiness in side of ourselves.

The parable, you will remember, is a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven. The point Jesus is trying to make is that the kingdom is found in our commitment of that one ultimate value for which everything else is willingly, even joyfully sacrificed. The pearl of great value is not then just another purchase. A pearl that can be put with the merchant's other fine pearls from all around the world. This one pearl is so beautiful. It is so important. It is so precious that it is the worth the

giving up of every other pearl the merchant has ever found in life; everything else kind of fails in comparison to that one perfect beauty.

Now the parable is, also, calling us to a new understanding of life. It is calling us to leave behind what I would call the hedging of our bets. To leave behind the attitudes that try to have life both ways. And we love to have life both ways, successes in the eyes of others and at the same time success in the eyes of God; treasurers here on earth and treasurers in heaven; a primary commitment to the ideals of the love of God and of the Gospel without leaving behind the primary commitment to the values of the world all around us. It is calling us to some discernment between what is worthy and what is ultimate worth in life; between beauty and ultimate beauty. It is calling us to give up a kind of fickle buffet style living and commit ourselves a kind of death of faith.

We have to remember too that such a commitment does not lead us in any way to look down upon other religions or other people's points of view. There are men and women of the abiding faith after all who find ultimate meaning and ultimate worth in the symbols and languages of Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism and hundreds of other isms in the world, but for those of us who call ourselves Christians, and those of us who seek to be followers of Jesus, we have to be willing to put our focus there. To sort out those paradoxes contradictions and to stick with our faith, what I would call the dark night of the soul; to have the courage to be sacrificially with Jesus and be willing to not simply talk about sharing our cross, but to commit ourselves to the work of what carrying our cross entails. I worked in a preschool a lot of years ago. The first thing I did was to tear my hair out, but second, I did I learn a phrase that I have carried with me for the rest of my life. And that phrase was "taking care of yourself." In other words, instead of worrying about what the other children are doing and how they are bothering you while they play with their toys, you worry about yourself and how you play the game.

I think Jesus phrased it this way, "Look at the log in your own eyes instead of the speck in the eyes of the other person." Otherwise our faith can become, and it has for many people in our modern way, a very negative thing, more about what you are against instead of the things we are strongly and passionately for. In reality then, the beauty and the precious perfection of the pearl of great price can be found, at least in the part of our willingness at some point to life, to put aside for a time and forget those other small pearls that we have gathered that we might enjoy the benefits of that ultimately that one costly pearl in all its beauty, and in all its truth, and in all its complexity, and by doing so we don't deny the loveliness of those other pearls we gathered, but we do into deeper maturity by willingly giving up what is meaningful, tender and worthy in favor of the greatest need and greatest worth.

Jesus reminds us then in this parable the Kingdom of Heaven is like the merchant who is search of fine pearls and finding that one pearl of great price, he went and sold everything that he had. He bought that one pearl. And so, what I wish for you today you might find the meaning, you might find truth, you might find beauty and together we seek the pearl of great price found first of all in the deep complexity and secondly at the same times the simplicity of a sacrificial life in the teaching and journey of faith of Jesus. And together we say AMEN.