

“The Pearl of Great Price”

Date: July 28, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Matthew 13:44; 45-46

Theme: Kingdom, priorities

Occasion: Short Stories by Jesus, series

This morning we heard two parables that sound a similar theme, though they are not exactly the same: The Pearl of Great Price and the Parable of the Treasure in the Field. Our focus is on the pearl, but the field echoes the theme.

Many scholars interpret the parable of the pearl as an allegory, *this* represents *that*, and you have to figure out what the analogy is. Some have said that Jesus is the merchant and he is searching for us, and to obtain our salvation he pays the ultimate sacrifice by giving his life.

Others have said that we are the merchant and Jesus is the pearl. When we discover His ultimate value, we sacrifice everything in order to follow him and become his disciples.

Amy-Jill Levine says both of these interpretations are good and they make sense. However, when Jesus told them to a first-century Jewish audience, would it have meant the same to them? Would they have heard the same meaning when Jesus first spoke these words?

In hindsight, we can read those meanings into them, but what might his words have meant to them at the time? In her characteristic style, she asks us to be a little more critical in our thinking and analyzing the words of Jesus, the context in which he spoke, and his audience. And always ask the question; in what way is the parable provocative, shocking or disturbing?

To begin with, she examines the merchant's role in the parable. It begins, "The kingdom of heaven is like a person, a merchant who...." The way that phrase is put, it could be any person, but for this story it is a merchant. That suggests, in a subtle way, that the main character is not God seeking us, or even Jesus seeking his own. It could mean any person.

Our rabbi then turns our attention to the pearl. "In allegorical readings," she says, "the pearl is the most desirable thing one could have and thus it must symbolize Christ, or the gospel, or the kingdom itself. That is not quite what the parable says." She tells us, "The kingdom of heaven is not compared to the pearl, it is compared to the merchant, who seeking fine pearls, sells all he has for one fabulous item. To restrict the analogy to the pearl eliminates the provocation of the parable."

Rabbi Levine then educates us on the preciousness of pearls in ancient times. They are jewels that the majority of the population in the Roman Empire would never have seen, let alone ever own. Only the very rich would have been able to afford them, they were so rare and precious.

There are some problems in equating the pearl to the kingdom or eternal life. For one thing, it cannot be "given" by one person to another. If the pearl is the gospel message it has to be proclaimed to all, and should not be the private possession of one person alone. It should not be withheld from others, but freely given to all, if the gospel is good news.

We now turn attention to the behavior of the merchant. Unlike the fellow who happens to stumble upon treasure in a field, the merchant is actively seeking something. He may already be closer to the kingdom in that he recognizes there is something he wants or needs, but he doesn't have it yet. The merchant, unlike the fellow in the field, is not satisfied with the status quo.

So, let's talk about this seeking. The merchant was not looking for "meaning," as some commentators have said; he is looking for a commodity that he will remarket. Nor is he looking for that one special pearl.

Rather, once he finds the magnificent pearl, he liquidates his holdings and buys it. Now, our merchant has obtained his desire: a beautiful object. But that's not going to provide food, clothing or shelter. What's he going to do with it, besides look at it and admire it? He can't support himself or his family unless he sells it again.

One commentator said, "What the merchant did may not have measured up to everyone else's understanding of common sense." Another one said, what the merchant did was to engage in market speculation, assuming the price would go up and he could turn a profit. Most of us cannot take such risks.

The modern analogy would be to put all one's eggs in a single basket. But then again, at least you could have eggs for breakfast, you can't eat pearls. Rabbi Levine brings us back to task and says, "then again, there is nothing in the parable that suggests that the one pearl is obtained as an investment."

Back to our merchant. Whether what he does is risky or wise, fool-hardy or dedicated, he has gained a pearl of enormous value. In the gaining, not only has he fulfilled a desire he didn't know he had; he has also changed his identity.

He had been looking for fine pearls, but he buys only one. By finding that pearl of ultimate worth, the merchant stops being a merchant. Thus he redefines himself, and we must see him anew as well. What is he? What do

we make of his example? What does the former merchant do now? And how do we find ourselves in this parable?

Most readers can identify with the man in the field in the first parable; identifying with the merchant requires more effort. We can all be the lucky person who finds a treasure; indeed many people dream about being this person, especially those who like to buy weekly lottery tickets. But as far we can tell from the parable, the lucky man who finds buried treasure in a field has not been spending his whole life looking for it. There are very few of us who are wholesalers seeking fine pearls, and fewer still who would sell everything in order to buy one of them.

The word *treasure* will trigger in many Bible students' minds a warning that Jesus issues in the Sermon on the Mount. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

A buried treasure is an earthly treasure; it can be lost and it could be stolen. Rabbi Levine thinks we can best understand this parable if we move out of the economic realm. We've gotten so focused on trying to define what the pearl is, that we may have missed the shock value of this parable.

The kingdom is not the pearl and it is not the merchant. Rather, the kingdom is like a merchant who seeks pearls and who, upon finding what he was not expecting – the greatest of the great – makes every effort to attain it. The merchant has found what he wanted, although until the moment of the find, he didn't realize his true desire.

His future plans have changed; he can stop looking and enjoy and appreciate what he has discovered. In the process, he has changed. He is

no longer a merchant of pearls; he is man who has found what he didn't know he wanted or needed: the best of the best of the pearls.

In other words, he has discovered what is most important to his life. He no longer has to keep searching; he found what his heart and soul desired. He sells all that he has to purchase it and now he is out of business, but it doesn't matter. He has what he wanted. Once he purchases it, he is no longer a merchant. And there is the challenge.

By the standards of the status quo - whether in 1st century Galilee, or 21st century America – the merchant has acted in a reckless manner. However, he doesn't care about the standards of society. He defines his treasure in his own terms. He is able to recognize what for him has true value, and he can do what he needs to do to obtain it.

The pearl he purchases is not simply the best of the lot, the one among the many. It is qualitatively different, exemplary. It points beyond the concept of "pearl" to something new, something never before seen or known. There is a transcendent quality to it. And so the parable provokes.

What is *your* pearl of great price? What is of ultimate concern to you? For what would you sell everything you own? Is it God, or something else? Is it your children, your career, your hobby? For the one who sits in prison, it might be freedom. For another it might be fleeing their home country, which has become a hell-hole, to seek a better life in a land of promise. For an addict, it might be sobriety.

What is of ultimate concern for you? That's what this parable is asking. What is your highest priority? Jesus challenges our notion of treasure, telling us not to seek what can be lost or stolen, but to seek what is eternal. Have we allowed the kingdom of God to be our pearl of great price, or have we allowed a fake pearl to take its place?

In conclusion, remember these words which Jesus spoke.
“Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these other things shall be added unto you.” In whatever fields you’re digging in, may you be lucky enough to find the treasure of the Kingdom of heaven. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from *Short Stories by Jesus* by Amy-Jill Levine. Harper Collins Publishing: NY, NY, 2014, “The Pearl of Great Price,” pp. 139-164,