

“What Do You Seek?”

Psalm 105:1-11 (From *Psalms for Praying* by Nan Merrill)

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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Between working at Dayton's and the University of Minnesota bookstores, I was with JB Hudson Jewelers for a couple of years. Our string of parables could certainly have taken me back to the agricultural theme but instead the mention of treasure and a pearl of great price prompted me to jewelry memories. Pearls, multiple strings of pearls bring images of czarinas and royals; it brings to mind a scene from an Errol Flynn movie where, as one of the queen's privateers, Flynn gifts Elizabeth with a single South Sea pearl. Pearls remind me of Princess Di and her Sloane rangers wearing a string of pearls with jeans and crewneck sweaters, just as recommended in the Preppy Handbook. There are attempts to make pearls trendy but they are timeless.

Most pearls now are not found but cultured. One of the world's most notable cultured pearl sources is Mikimoto. Mikimoto imports Mississippi River mussels from Minnesota; the mussels are made into shards and implanted into the oysters. It is the irritant within the oyster that provokes the nacre to surround it to ease that irritation. The pearl then is the resulting balm to the oyster. And they soothe human beings as well.

Pearls get more beautiful with wear. It is important to keep them away from chemicals like chlorine or perfume; sunblock and hair sprays can harm the surface of a pearl but to keep them in a protective air tight space is to dehydrate them. They must be worn, they need to breathe and risk the elements and they become even more beautiful in that way. And it seems, the writer of the book of Matthew held either pearls or the common adages about them, in high regard.

Chapter six of Matthew contains instruction on prayer, including the Lord's Prayer. Chapter seven proceeds from prayer to judgment; just after instruction to take the log out of one's own eye before suggesting that someone else has a speck in theirs, Matthew says, "Do not give what is holy to the dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot, and turn and maul you" (Matthew 7:6). He then says, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened" (7:7-8). There is a flow here from prayer to what is gained in prayer: wisdom – a pearl of great price - found through deeper connection with God. And with that connection and that wisdom comes awareness of our frailty, there is an invitation to search and knock, to work to find our true self and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. It is the invitation to be life-long seekers.

Our string of parables from further on in Matthew is about the meeting of two worlds: the one we see and the one we are continually seeking. It is about the meeting place of the human and the divine. It is about our constant attempts to know and follow Jesus. And if I bring it back to oysters and pearls it comes to this, Jesus is at once the irritant and the nacre. He is the mussel shard that is implanted within us and he is the nacre that soothes our souls and creates a multi-colored sheen within. The triune God, or in another way we name God, the kingdom of heaven exists among us; our challenge is that God is both irritant and nacre.

God knows we take our best and hide it under a bushel basket and there is that irritating teaching in the lectionary every three years: don't do that. Every year there is a version of Jesus walking by the lakeshore with the invitation to drop whatever we are up to and follow; how often do we stop and give that some thought? The lessons of the gospels cannot be checked off as a to-do list. It is a constant calling.

Like the great commandment is a constant calling, "love one another as I have loved you." Because God first loved us, we try to love our neighbors. But what about our enemies? At the very least, it is a nuisance and sometimes a bane of our existence to be asked to love those who have beaten us in a business deal, manipulated an outcome in the workplace, have acted without integrity, or brought emotional or physical violence into our lives. In these days of loss of public norms, volatility of language, a worldwide pandemic, the rise of white supremacists, an ebbing of trust we are pretty focused on the logs in the other's eyes and loving one another up to a point and no further.

Included in this string of parables are these words, "the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Matthew Skinner says, "No other gospel expresses so much nervous concern about how to determine what differentiates true believers from the pretenders in their midst. The promise of a day of reckoning in which Jesus will reward the persistent faithful and expel the poseurs seems intended to soothe these worries, perhaps to keep fragile and wounded communities from tearing themselves apart" (Sojourners, Nov. 3, 2014).

In this time and place, it is critical to remember that the coin, the treasure, and the pearl are metaphors for God's new heaven, which Jesus tells us is very near. God's plan and God's hopes are close enough to peak our interest and yet hidden subtly enough that it invites us to go on the hunt. But it is not a hunt for real gold nor the power that is so often coveted alongside riches.

God's love is real and so is God's judgment. Because of the love, judgment is not random, illogical, or capricious but based on our faithfulness, perseverance, obedience, compassion, and readiness for discipleship. The past seven decades have seen so much change – four and five lane highways - lanes getting wider, speeds getting faster – new technology in guardrails, GPS, and Google Earth. It promotes a fallacy that we can find anything and everything worth having in the life on our own.

What today's string of parables does, is invite us to action. They suggest that the kingdom of heaven is a way of life we are invited to search for each and every day. The kingdom of heaven is a path that is integrated and infused within the world in which we live, but not obviously so. It is not one of the freeways. It is definitely not the fast lane, possibly not even a through lane. The kingdom of heaven is like trolling down a dirt road trying to find that final, smaller dirt road to a friend's cabin. The kingdom of heaven is like seeing your faces sitting in the boulevard awaiting a carillon concert – it is like hearing Life Every Voice and Sing ringing out as God's love originating here and vibrating into the neighborhood. The kingdom of heaven may even be found in some aspects of social distancing and coronavirus lifestyle changes.

In the midst of a pandemic and still shaking from the death of George Floyd, the Presbyterian Church USA had its first online General Assembly in June. As it was forming, Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson, asked those assembled virtually, "What are you seeking?" And then Nelson said, "It is our collective faithfulness that will be the grounding for the transformation of this denomination." There is some old language used when calling a new pastor in the Presbyterian Church – "if the way be made clear" ... it is meant to help us sort through and let go of what we think we want to help us find what God's intends for us to have.

God intends for a woman to have what she needs to eat and keep her household. The kingdom of heaven might be like pastors willing to leave a happy, treasured call in the midst of pandemic and move to St. Paul to serve The House of Hope. To be clear – this is still about metaphors – Lynn and Mark are not the kingdom – but as new leaders, they will share with us their experience of seeking, hunting, letting go, and recognizing God's presence and plan.

What are you seeking? What are we seeking? It is the perseverance and the seeking that keeps our minds from worrying about the outer darkness and it is in recognizing those kingdom moments that keep us from an eternity of gnashing our teeth. Worldly security and pleasures are not enough – Covid has made that clear. White privilege and systemic racism are no longer hidden/buried. The sudden loss of what was normal has left us exhausted and grieving. We are knackered – k-n-a-c-k-e-r-e-d. But what if this is the kingdom as irritant? What if this is the need for holy nacre – n-a-c-r-e?

For a moment here, I turn to John O'Donohue: "There are no manuals for the construction of the individual you would like to become. You are the only one who can decide this and take up the lifetime of work that it demands. This is a wonderful privilege and such an exciting adventure. To grow into the person that your deepest longing desires is a great blessing. If you can find a creative harmony between your soul and your life, you will have found something infinitely precious. You may not be able to do much about the great problems of the world or to change the situation you are in, but if you can awaken the eternal beauty and light of your soul, you will bring light wherever you go: the gift of life is given to us for ourselves and also to bring peace, courage, and compassion to others" (*Eternal Echoes*).

In the love of God, you and I, my friends, are the pearl. As we are active in Christian community, we are both seekers and signs of the kingdom of God in the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.