

HOW MUCH IS THE KINGDOM WORTH?

For many years now I have been trying to suggest to people that the parables are not easy to comprehend. We turn most of them into simple little moralisms for children, when in fact they are the primer for the most conscientious adults who want to walk the Christian Path. Jesus Himself warns us about this in several places, including in this morning's Scripture reading.

The parable of the great pearl is not obtuse or subtle like the story of the Samaritan. It is understandable that we would take the story of the Samaritan as a call to do good deeds – if we are not looking for the Gospel in it in the first place. It does not strike us as strange that the Samaritan has no need for God. He is a good man with compassion for “his neighbor,” and we should take this story as encouragement for us to be more compassionate and caring for those who are in need.

Only if we expect Jesus to be declaring and proclaiming the Gospel of God's love (and not the euphemisms we usually hear, about how we should all be more loving) do we go back over it more carefully and discover verse thirty-three. It is the personal and specific *mercy of God* that is moving this Samaritan to the personal and specific caring he shows for the man he finds beaten by the side of the road.

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The parable of the Samaritan is found only in Luke. The parable of the great pearl is found only in Matthew. Some of you have caught on that I think Luke knows the Gospel far better than Matthew does. Matthew is still caught up in the perspectives of the Old Covenant; in proving that Old Testament prophecy is being fulfilled; in claiming that much of what is taking place is preordained. And he is much more into keeping The Law than into mercy and grace. That does not mean that Matthew is wrong about everything or has no value. More likely it only means that I am.

But I still find it strange that most of Christendom is still trying to assume that there can be no difference between Matthew's perspective and Luke's. I never run into people in the “real world” that I know and experience who have exactly the same opinions and approaches

and convictions about everything. Yet it is widely held that there must be no contradictions or differences between the way Matthew tells us about Jesus and the way Luke tells us about Jesus.

All the evidence suggests that Matthew and Luke never met, never knew each other, never collaborated, and in all likelihood were each part of different Christian communities that had no direct contact with each other. I think that gives us a marvelous opportunity to learn from them both. Only, we cannot do that if we insist that there can be no differences between what they are each telling us. I make no effort to homogenize the two. I assume most of you already know that. In any case, if you come to me and say, “But it says in Matthew ...” – to me that is not an argument; it’s just an observation. I do not feel challenged to explain how Matthew agrees with Luke or with any other writer of the New Testament. If you cannot see any difference of perspective between Hebrews, Romans, John, and the Book of Revelation, I do not think that means you are more faithful. I think that means you were taught to read the Bible without discernment.

In any case, the parable of the great pearl is wonderful. If we do not learn very much from it, it is not because of subtle or hidden secrets. It is because we are too busy to spend much time with it. If we are in a hurry with Jesus – if we do not know that He is more profound and more important than all the other voices and influences all around us – then He simply waits. He is not running out of time; we are.

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People do not discover God’s Kingdom unaided. We are all looking for treasure, in one way or another. But in these twin parables, a man stumbles onto treasure in a field, and the merchant discovers a pearl more beautiful than he had ever imagined existed. He had *hoped* to find a valuable pearl, but he did not know that there was a pearl so beautiful, so big, so perfect.

To understand this or any other parable, we have to climb into the place of one of the characters. In this story, the merchant is the only character, so that makes it a little easier. Suddenly this merchant finds a pearl far beyond anything he had expected or ever imagined. We do not have to spend very long in this broken world to realize that it would be wondrous and wonderful indeed if we could belong to God’s Kingdom. But is there any way for us to get in – any way to get there from here?

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Of course, there is no way to purchase God's Kingdom. None of us have the wherewithal. But quibbling aside, entering the Kingdom, even after we are invited, requires some response from us. "Responsibility" only means that we have the *ability* to respond. Responding to the grace and love of God – and the chance to be part of a true and loving Kingdom – does mean that we have to turn away from some of our old habits and approaches. If we carry our jealousy, vengeance, hopelessness, or pride into the Kingdom with us, how long will it keep on being the Kingdom?

So there is always a price to pay for entering the Kingdom. Everyone has the price, if they are willing to pay it. And the price is the same for everyone: "*All that you have.*" At least that's what this parable says. And if we need to be reminded, it is Jesus telling the parable.

Suddenly the parable is not simple at all. I am the merchant, and this parable is asking me if I want the pearl badly enough to give everything I have for it – everything I have; everything I am; every gift and ability and quality I possess. And of course that flies in the face of everything we have all learned about how to survive here. This parable is against all worldly wisdom, and some of our worldly wisdom has been hard-earned and painfully earned. I know some things about life up to this point, and this parable is not the recommended approach we believe in for anything here in this world. I should put all my eggs in one basket? I should give up the "golden mean" and become an extremist when it comes to God and His Kingdom? I should burn all my bridges; keep no safety net; set nothing aside for a rainy day? I should stop caring about being well-balanced, and risk everything on this one pearl?

This parable is horrible, and horribly scary. It implies or is telling me straight out that there is no other way into the Kingdom. But what if I get this great pearl and then discover later that there is a hidden flaw? What if somebody spills vinegar on it? And I have already given all that I have?

I am just saying that after a little Pollyanna sentiment wears off, this is not a simple parable at all. We start to remember our real fears and doubts and excuses and escape clauses.

For my part, I know that Jesus really did live this way. He did not hedge His bets. It was all for God, and nothing was held back.

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He was in dead earnest about this parable. And I am left asking myself if I am really willing to follow Him. How much is the Kingdom really worth to me?

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It all seems very risky, very foolish ... unless of course this pearl is truly beyond price – beyond all other wealth. Jesus kept telling us that the reward in Heaven is greater than anything we can know or imagine here. But how can we be sure? And do we trust Him enough to throw caution to the winds? To live in total trust? To care more about His Kingdom than we do about anything else on earth?

So do all of us know the parable of the pearl of great price? Not hardly! Having heard it once or twice does not mean we “know” it or trust it or believe it or that we live our lives by its light.

If we trust God, do we still live cautious, frightened lives? Will God prove false, stop caring about us, desert us, withdraw His presence from our lives? We often wonder. And the pearl costs “*all that you have.*” Put everything on number seven on the great roulette wheel of life and you will win a fabulous fortune ... or lose everything. That’s the real Gospel – the real Message of the Christian Faith. It is no wonder that there are few who go through the narrow gate; few who really believe that Jesus is their Savior; few who follow Jesus more than they worship all the idols everywhere around us.

Does anyone here think I am trying to scold anybody? Jesus’ parables do not scold us. Only if we hear them through the filters of humanism and the popular notions about how we should all try harder to be “good” do they scold us. Jesus is trying to tell us the GOOD NEWS of the Gospel – the Good News of God’s love. But at first we do not think there should be any difference between the false promises of this world and the Good News of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus tells it straight and lives it clearly, and that often startles us when we begin to pay attention. The only problem is, that pearl really is beyond price, more valuable and more precious than anything else we will ever find in this realm.

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Well, rumor has it, in our day and time, that we no longer have to worry ourselves about such things. We all have an inalienable right to go to Heaven. It will not matter at all *how* we lived here or what we lived for. Heaven does not require the love or grace of God; it is automatic. So we can forget this parable until after we die and then think more about the great pearl then – if that still seems important on the other side.

That's really comforting, don't you think? At least for those who think it is better to trust the rumors than it is to trust Jesus.