

May 19

The Pearl of Great Price

Matthew 13:44-46

President Jimmy Carter for years led a Bible study at his church in Plains Georgia. He still does it occasionally to this day. Someone collected many of his opening devotionals into a book. This is what he wrote about this passage of scripture.

*Anybody who grew up around railroads knows that they used to have white marble-sized pebbles to stabilize the roadbed. As most farm boys did, I always had a slingshot that I carried around in my hip pocket. It was just part of my clothes, like my pants and my shirt. We used to go to the railroad and collect these little rocks, particularly the smooth round ones that would fly straight. We kept stashes of them around our yard to shoot at various targets. I remember one day I was coming from the railroad with my hands and pockets full of the best rocks I could find. My mother walked out on the front porch and called me, "Jimmy, come here. I've got something for you."*

*She was there with her eyes and heart full of love, holding a pan of freshly baked cookies. She held them out to me and said, "I baked some cookies for you." I will never forget standing there for a few seconds trying to decide whether to drop those relatively worthless rocks and take my mother's cookies. It was a small event, but similar things on a much larger scale happen quite often.*

*As a farmer and as president, I sometimes had to decide whether to abandon some ideas I had been clinging to for the sake of something new and better. All of us tend to cling to old things instead of accepting the new life that Christ offers us. In our modern chaotic work, we sometimes fail to recognize the great opportunity or a simpler, more peaceful, and more gratifying life as we follow our Savior. But when we choose anything else, it is like clinging to dirty pebbles instead of enjoying fresh-baked cookies.*

In our parable we have a merchant. He has gone searching for pearls. It was what he did. He bought and sold them. One day he comes across a pearl so perfect, just the right color and size. It was the kind you would find once in a lifetime. The merchant realizes that the pearl is of ultimate importance to him. He is willing to risk all to acquire it.

This leads us to the first question that this parable gives to us. Is there anything that important to you? And if you say yes, should it have that value? What I mean is that sometimes someone might answer family is more important than anything else. Yet, I have seen people's lives destroyed because of negative family interactions. Instead of admitting that their family is broken they continue do try and make it work causing undue emotional harm. Is that wise? I have seen people think their job is the single most important thing in their life and they sacrifice everything for it. They become workaholics and because of that every other relationship suffers. Is that wise? So sometimes we seek for something of value and are willing to sacrifice to obtain it, but perhaps our priorities are wrong. Other times we see that the priorities are right but often the world does not appreciate it. We see people who, because of their faith, strive to love unconditionally, to forgive all and to strive for peace and acceptance of all. Too often they are called naïve or silly by people outside the church and sometimes inside as well. They begin to wonder if they are wrong.

Think back to our story. Since we are talking about the Kingdom of Heaven and Jesus said that finding that pearl is like finding heaven, of course the merchant sacrifices all to get it. But think about what that does to his life. He would no longer be a merchant, but instead would be a man who owns a pearl. In selling everything the merchant loses the goods and money that enables day-to-day purchases of food and clothing. What would his family think about his decisions? How would he and they survive? Yes, he was now the owner of the pearl but was the cost too high?

This leads to a second question. When will we know when enough is enough? Is it enough to know that such a pearl exists? Is it enough to have held it in your hand? No, Jesus was trying to get his listeners that day, as well as us today, to understand that when we seek for the kingdom of heaven you need to be willing to go "all in."

Too often, we don't want to risk like this. We dabble our toes in the stream of commitment and then decide that possessing the pearl would cost too much of our time, resources or whatever. We, as President Carter said, hold onto whatever dirty little rocks we have that are worthless in comparison to the cookies offered.

Think about the challenges of our faith. Jesus tells us to forgive. The disciples wanted to know how many times we had to forgive someone. They were generous in saying, "Is seven times enough?" Jesus goes all in and says 70 times 7. Are we willing to forgive to find the joy of heaven?

Another time, when Jesus was asked what it took to enter the kingdom, the man was told to go and sell all that he had. In his case, money had become his god. Jesus does not require us to always beggar ourselves for the kingdom. But when all of our faith and giving decisions are done safely so as to not hurt our bottom line he questions our commitment. We are challenged to be generous if we are to enter the kingdom. Are we willing to be extravagantly generous to find the rewards of heaven?

Another time Jesus was asked what it took to be faithful and he said to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. When asked who is our neighbor he shared the story of the Good Samaritan. We will talk more about this next week but we know the basics. That hated Samaritan showed love and compassion to one in need and willingly risked to be a neighbor. Are we willing to go all in at times in helping another, being neighborly because we want the kingdom of God to be lived out here on earth?

So again, we are presented with the questions: What has ultimate value in our lives? What are we seeking for, especially when it comes to our walk of faith? When we find it are we willing to let go of what we have to embrace something new? Are we willing to let our search for the kingdom fundamentally change us? Are we willing to go all in?

This is a parable that makes you wish Jesus had said more. I would have liked to hear what happened to the merchant after purchasing the pearl. Did he enjoy his treasure even if it brought hardship? Did he regret the purchase? Did he decide that the price was too high and sell it? Don't you wish you knew?

Jesus was trying to help the people who were there that day understand what it is like to seek the kingdom of God. You go about your life, but with expectation that God will do something new. You go about willing to let go, as Jimmy Carter said, of the dirty

rocks in your fist that seem valuable because you are offered something infinitely better. And when you find it you are willing to go all in because the kingdom is worth it.

In closing let me share about a college student I got to know when I was in Bellingham. He attended our college meetings. I forget now what degree he was pursuing. What I do remember is his talking to me one day. The college group had been involved in a service project, I believe it was helping at the Union Gospel serving a meal. He had volunteered and, in visiting with the people there, something had happened to him. What he wanted to share was how he had never felt so alive, so filled with joy as he had that night. He was thinking about changing his major and focus on gaining skills to be able to work with disadvantaged people. It would mean staying longer at the college. He was afraid his parents would be upset because that kind of work didn't pay well but it felt right to him. He ultimately decided to go for an education degree with a certification to be a counselor. His plan was to work in an inner city school. I moved before he graduated so I don't know if this occurred. What I do know is that he had a sense of peace and joy after that decision.

We are all the merchant looking for that thing of great value to us. We need to evaluate to make sure our priorities are correct, embrace it when we find it and not worry about what others think. Or to put it another way, we are given moments when God asks us to drop our dirty rocks and receive a cookie in its place. We should never hesitate.