

Sermon Series: “Provocations in Wisdom”**Sermon Title: “Parable of the Pearl”****Scripture Text: Matthew 13:45-46****May 26, 2019****Scripture Reading:** Matthew 13:44-46 (NRSV)

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Sermon:

So, last week Dan preached on the parable of the hidden treasure, and this week I get the parable of the pearl, which are pretty much the same lesson, right? Dan had his take on the hidden treasure, in which he focused on “generosity,” which I find interesting since hardly a week earlier we were sitting in our worship planning meeting, realizing the glaring similarity of these two parables, when Dan blurts out, in a rather maniacal tone, “Haha! At least I get to preach first!” There might have even been a “niener, niener, niener” thrown in for good measure. So much for generosity.

Nonetheless, here we are with a strikingly similar parable to last week. And, I mean, what else is there to say? A guy finds a treasure in a field, so he sells everything to buy the field. Another guy finds a really nice pearl, and sells everything to buy that pearl. Pretty straightforward right? We might as well wrap this up early and get a little longer Memorial Day weekend brunch out of the deal. Not so fast! When have you ever known a preacher so easily give up the opportunity to pontificate further upon a passage of scripture. Fat chance First Covenant!

But seriously, while these two parables indeed parallel and echo each other at one level, there are some unique nuances for consideration here. And my hope over the next 20 minutes is for us to begin to locate ourselves as the seeker, and wonder about what these parables might offer by way of invitation. Let’s start by taking a look at the parable itself.

Now, there’s a tendency with parables, as we’ve seen, to allegorize them too quickly, to liken each character or element of the story to something that fits into a cohesive

and recognizable framework by which we can assign meaning. An example here might be that we presume ourselves to be the merchant, and God to be the pearl, or perhaps wisdom the pearl, and therefore, the meaning is that once we find God, we should forsake or sacrifice all else for God or wisdom, what have you. So, for this interpretation, the meaning of the parable is about discipleship, it's about the cost and also the benefit of following Jesus. And that is a fine reading of the text.

But as Dan pointed out last week, a simple allegorical reading of the parable actually leaves a lot of questions unanswered, questions that, while maybe not on our radar, would have been quite puzzling and even troubling to the original hearers. Ethical questions, challenges to the conventional wisdom of the cultural and religious communities within which Jesus' hearers were embedded. Not small things.

Questions like, why would Jesus choose a pearl of all things? No one, and I mean NO ONE who was likely in Jesus' audience would have related to pearls. Pearls in Jesus' day were only for the super-wealthy, literally for people who lived in palaces. Not to mention, the powerful people who might have had the luxury to wear pearls did so while most of Jesus' hearers were merely trying to figure out how to eat tomorrow.

Pearls would have been recognized as both wildly out of reach, and likely a slap in the face of the lives and livelihoods of the common Jewish audiences that Jesus would have been speaking. Not to get political, but it would feel a bit like Ben Carson spending \$31,000 on his office dining set as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, while people around the country sit on 5-7 year waiting lists for public housing. Like, really?

Oh, and one more thing, pearls were like, borderline un-kosher. They came from a shellfish. So there's that. You can see why equating God to a really expensive pearl creates some fairly substantial problems in a 1st century Jewish context.

Well, in order to avoid many of these problems, some interpreters of today's parable flip the allegorical equation by envisioning God to be the merchant and we (humanity) to be the pearl, which changes the meaning of the parable significantly. Now, instead of it being about discipleship, it's about God's love for and relentless pursuit of humanity. We are God's precious pearl, of indescribable worth! And that too is a fine enough reading of the text. In fact, I rather like that one better.

The problem is, this too leaves many unanswered questions. For one, to make God out to be a merchant in search of fine pearls would have been quite a head-scratcher to

Jesus' audiences. While in our 21st Century capitalist society, we might rather regard merchants as hard working small business owners or inventive entrepreneurs, "merchants" in Jesus' day were not nearly as highly regarded. They were often the ones trying to get people to buy things they did not need at prices they could not afford. Especially if this merchant was in the business of buying and selling pearls, his character would be suspect immediately. Think timeshare salesperson, or ponzi-scheme!

Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar and professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School, puts it like this;

*"The kingdom of God is like a man, a merchant... Funny business at best; bad marketing for a parable. Jesus has caught my attention, but I'm not sure I'm going to like the product he is selling."*¹

Okay, so both of our allegorical interpretations begin to fall apart rather quickly. But what are we to make of this? And what is even the point of doing all of this work with the text, what with all of its traps and pitfalls?

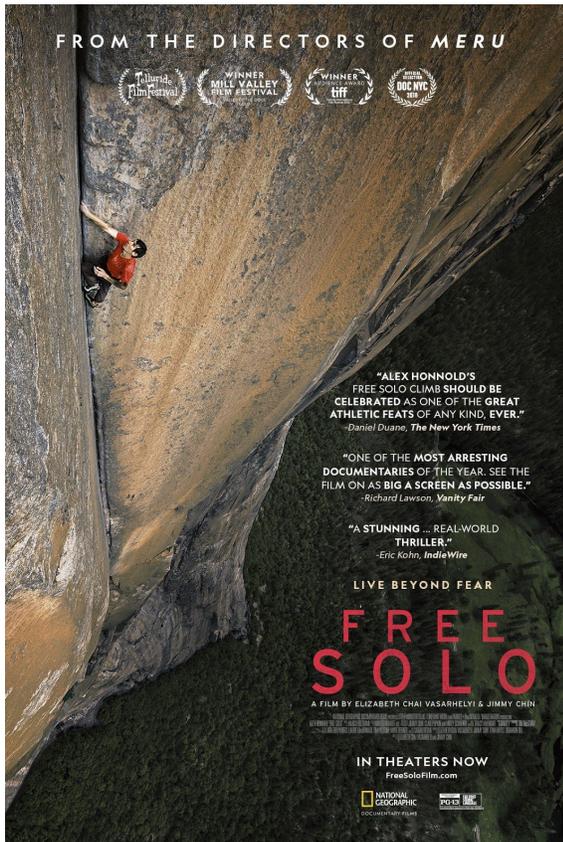
Well, parables were never meant to give easy answers or for us to merely figure out the formula, rather, they're meant to dislodge, to disorient, even to agitate, and ultimately to invite us into a new way of being. The Kingdom of God (which is the focus of most of the parables) is not merely a static but alternative order of things where God is now on top, but rather an entirely dynamic and transformative way of being in relation to God, to neighbor, and to all of God's creation. And the purpose of Jesus' parables, including this one, were to stir us into that new way of being.

So, if that's the case, then what exactly is this parable meant to stir or unsettle within us? Well, perhaps rather than seeking to avoid the problematic nature of the parable, with its crude and almost insulting images of decadence and dishonesty, maybe that's where the wisdom actually resides! What if it's through the use of rather disorienting images that Jesus teases out a new set of questions that his audience would likely not have applied to themselves? What if the parable invites us to a new set of questions?

Questions like; What should I be searching for? Or, what is of ultimate value? What do I really want? And, is it worth it? And, what would I do if I actually found the thing that I think that I want?

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, (New York: Harpers), 146.

This weekend I watched the movie Free Solo on Netflix. (ON SCREEN)



It is a documentary about rock climber Alex Honnold on his quest to perform a free solo climb of El Capitan in 2017, meaning, no ropes, on a wall that is over 3000 feet in elevation. The film won an Academy Award for best Documentary this past year, and created quite a bit of buzz flowing way beyond the climbing community. You'll see why in this trailer.

Video Clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urRVZ4SW7WU>

(SHOW TRAILER)

Isn't that crazy! So, as I was preparing for this sermon, I was exploring the idea of going "all in" for something of an ultimate desire or worth. And while I have no desire to risk my life to climb a rock, you have to marvel a bit at Alex's total commitment to this one thing, such that he would put his very life on the line for this single goal or prize. There's something in that that is a bit transcendent, that it's not so much about the rock itself, but something deeper in the human spirit, a thing beneath the thing.

Have you ever asked yourself, what do I really want? What is of ultimate value, and to what lengths would I go to obtain it? What would you “sell everything” or “lose it all” for? The more I think about this question of ultimacy, the more I realize the tragedy that many of us “spend” our lives every day on that which is NOT ultimate.

We spend everything on pleasing or winning over this or that person, chasing that promotion, finding new curtains to match the new couch, you name it. I spend a lot of my time and energy on things that quite simply are NOT worth the time and energy. And part of that is just life, but sometimes I wonder if a part of it is to distract us from deeper stuff, the stuff that is worth our time and energy, perhaps because we fear what is beneath the surface, and what it might cost us if we were to go “all in”.

Some of you have found some things beneath the surface for which you have gone “all in.” You have left a job that stole your life, or a relationship that demoralized you, or stepped toward a calling, or made yourself vulnerable in community, or stood up for a deeply held conviction. You’ve stood in the face of terrifying vulnerability, but you knew you had to step out in faith in order to pursue a more truthful or whole or healthy life, to say yes to your beloved self. And many of you have paid a price for that. But would you ever go back? Or would you say it was worth the risk, or the cost?

One of the invitations of this parable is to take stock of these values and priorities. To look squarely at what is of deepest meaning or ultimate value, and to ask, what am I spending my life on? What is my El Capitan? And, what is keeping me from going “all in”? What fear, what risk, what self-doubt, what circumstance keeps me from pursuing that ultimate desire? And what if I were to find it or obtain it? What would it really be worth?

Now, some of us have a hard time knowing or acknowledging what we desire. Either because we’ve been taught that desire is a bad thing, that it’s selfish or destructive. Or perhaps because we’ve not had the power or luxury to think about what we want or need, what we long for in the deeper parts of your soul. Remember, Jesus spoke this parable in a social and religious context that itself was rife with obligation and hierarchy, not to mention the crude imagery that he used, so it must have been intended to make his audience a bit uncomfortable, to place desire back into the equation as a guide of sorts to that which is most valuable.

The question, it seems, for Jesus is *not* whether the initial desire is itself good or bad, but to what does it lead? Will we be so blinded by our search for “fine pearls”, our own

surface level pursuits, that we fail to recognize the deeper desire beneath it, the hidden wholeness to which our pursuits are pointing us?

Many of us can see what our “fine pearls” are, the things that we tend to chase after, but what is our pearl of great price? Perhaps there is a pearl out there beyond your comprehension. And if we were to happen upon it, would we even notice it? And where might I even begin to look in order to find it?

I think the parable suggests that we *start with our longing*. Begin with what we are looking for, and see where it leads us. It’s interesting to me that Jesus doesn’t damn the object of the merchant’s search or longing in the parable. He could have said, “The kingdom is like a merchant searching for fine pearls, but when he found them, he realized that they were worthless, and so he ditched the pearls and went searching instead of God.” NO, the parable tells us that the guy finds a pearl. His initial longing bears the image of the ultimate longing. But what he finds is not just any pearl, and it’s not even just bigger or better than the others, rather, there is something qualitatively different about this one pearl, something transcendent, to the extent that once he finds it, he stops looking.

Listen again to how Amy-Jill Levine reflects on the parable;

“Our merchant was in search of fine pearls; he found one that surpassed all the rest, and he bought it. He changes focus from the many to the one, and he stops looking. ... (here), we have a man in the wrong profession. We have the wrong target of his initial search - a luxury item that few can afford; it has lachrymose and nonkosher origins; its purchase requires a use of funds that could have been given to the poor. We have the wrong result of the search - the merchant finds something he was not seeking. He thought he wanted “fine pearls”; it turns out, he had incorrectly assessed his desire and his goal. To obtain his pearl he engages in the risky and seemingly foolish venture of divesting. We have the wrong result - the merchant has spent everything he has on a pearl with no practical value. Once he purchases it, he is no longer a merchant. And therein lies the challenge.”²

What if all of life’s searching was pointing you to one thing which, having found it would fundamentally change the nature of your relationship with all of your seeking? What if you were to find the thing beneath the thing? And what if the thing itself defies your possession, such that the thing becomes not something for you to take hold of or

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, (New York: Harpers), 160.

obtain, but that which takes hold of you. And what if this thing that takes hold of you refuses to be merely an *object* for you to possess, but a *subject* which you must contend with, like Jacob wrestling with God, transforming and giving him a new identity.

What if this One precious thing beneath the thing invites you into relationship, exposes the true nature of your longing, and holds you in the vulnerability of your desire? There is a thing beneath the thing, a hidden wholeness, a bottomless belovedness, a oneness with God and all of God's creation underneath all of our desire. What if in all of your searching you were to touch up on that ever-deepening river of divine life that it is already within you, but has until now remained hidden!? What would you do? What would you sell or divest of for that one thing? And what if it changed your very identity, what if you were no longer a merchant? What would that mean? And what might you need to do to prepare for that reality?

Imaginative prayer experience:

What have you been seeking? Recall or visualize the ways you have sought to satisfy that desire or longing this week. Now imagine that as you are searching, you encounter the very thing that you've been looking for! What does it look like, feel like, etc... Now invite God to reveal to you the pearl beyond your comprehension, the very ground beneath your longing, the ultimate goal of that for which you have been searching! Imagine yourself going "all in" for that ultimate desire or longing. Can you trust in the One who holds you in the vulnerability of your longing? What possibility emerges as you imagine yourself in this space? What release or freedom does it open in you? Where do you feel that release or freedom in your body?

Pray

Benediction: As you go, may God lead you to the limits of your longing, and open your senses to see and taste and feel the thing beneath the thing, the hidden wholeness that is already within you. And when you encounter that pearl of great price, may you have the courage to go "all in". Go in peace.