

## Proper 12, Pentecost X July 27, 2008

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Today, I want to offer three ways of looking at this little parable—three different perspectives that may help you to go a bit deeper into what Jesus is saying. If one of these especially grabs you, take it home and chew on it a bit this week.

This parable is almost always heard in such a way as we see ourselves as the central character, the merchant—challenged by the value, and the cost, of life in the Kingdom, of life with Christ. When you take that perspective on the parable, notice the sort of response Jesus talks about. Jesus does not say of the merchant that he thought highly of the pearl, or that he saw it as a worthy thing deserving respect and care. The merchant isn't described as believing that the world was a better place because the pearl was in it. In fact, Jesus shows no interest at all in what the merchant thought or believed or felt about the pearl. Jesus cared about what the man *did*. His actions, his willingness to make a commitment *and* to live that out—this is what mattered.

Also, the merchant did not hire a consultant, arrange for an option to buy with creative financing, low monthly payments and a parachute clause in case the deal went sour. There was risk—this one move would make him or break him, and he knew it. But that sort of action, and that sort of risk, are what it takes.

When it comes to ultimate questions—questions of meaning and faith, questions of life and death—there is no option for a diversified portfolio—for a little of this and a little of that.

There is exactly one price—whatever you got. And what we think, what we believe—deep down inside or just barely—that matters most as it is made real, as it is expressed and given life in actions, and choices, and decisions.

The merchant could have fervently believed that the pearl was indeed worth everything he owned. He could even have told folks that he believed this. He could have formed a society. But such belief and such babbling did not get him the pearl. To get the pearl, he had to act, and to act in a way that both said “yes” to what he wanted, and said “no” to every other alternative and option. He had to risk it all on one choice—and that risk had to be real.

It’s sorta like the story about the chicken and the pig who go out together for a morning stroll. The chicken suggests they stop for breakfast and the pig asks what he wants and the chicken says bacon and eggs. They walk for a while in silence until the pig declines the invitation. “For you”, he says to the chicken, “bacon and eggs is an investment; for me it’s a total commitment.”

To discover the pearl was a crisis—a crisis that called for a total commitment, for a new understanding of the value of his life, and of the things in his life. To discover the kingdom is always such a crisis; it always deals with both the price and the value of our lives. And what matters most is not what we believe abstractly, but what we do—really.

That's one way to look at the parable, and it's the most common. Here's another way. Try reversing the images. The merchant is the Lord, and he is looking for something of great value and great beauty. He finds you—you personally, you by name. And He holds you in his hand. The Lord looks at you, he looks very carefully, and he sees in you all of the beauty and all of the value, and all of the potential that is really there, deep within who you are, and who you can be. The Lord truly sees you, you personally, and the Lord loves what he sees. *You* are the pearl of great price, of great value.

Moved by his love for you, moved by all that is and can be beautiful and valuable within you, the Lord makes a choice. For the Lord has great power and vast authority. He chooses to lose that power and authority, he chooses to empty himself of all of that, he chooses to surrender everything he has, so it will be possible for him to possess you; so that he can come to you as the perfect image of love, and invite you into relationship with himself. There is still no guarantee that the great cost he chooses to pay will result in what he wants—that's up to you. But the possibility is enough—and the price is paid.

All of this is true. You do not have to see in yourself, right now, all of the beauty and value that the Lord sees—it is enough that he sees it, and that we know that he sees it. But *you* are the pearl of great value. And it is for you, for you individually, for you personally, that the price has been paid. In you is great beauty and value.

Think about that. What does that say about how you can live, and about how we see and deal with one another. That's perspective number two.

This third perspective on the pearl isn't mine—it's a little story from *Tales of a Magic Monastery*—it is in a section called “Are you rich, or are you poor?” The narrator is a pilgrim monk, a seeker, he meets another monk, and the story goes like this:

### THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

He asked me what I was looking for.

“Frankly,” I said, “I'm looking for the Pearl of Great Price.”

He slipped his hand into his pocket, drew it out, AND GAVE IT TO ME. It was just like that! I was dumbfounded. Then I began to protest. “You don't want to give it to me? Don't you want to keep it for yourself? But . . .”

When I kept this up, he said finally—“Look, is it better to have the Pearl of Great Price, or to give it away?”

Well, now I have it. I don't tell anyone. From some there would just be disbelief and ridicule. “You, you have the Pearl of Great Price? Hah!” Others would be jealous, or someone might steal it. Yes, I do have it. But there's that question—“Is it better to have it, or to give it away?” How long will that question rob me of my joy?

Three different perspectives on a parable. Take one home and chew on it.