

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 30 July 2023
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A – Lectionary 17

1st Reading: *1 Kings 3:5-12*

Psalm: *119:129-136*

2nd Reading: *Romans 8:26-39*

Gospel: *Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Does anyone here like to collect things? When I was growing up it was popular to collect stamps or to collect coins. I know that Wayne likes to collect tractors, and I know of a couple of people, including our daughter Arwen, who like to collect lighthouses - not real ones, of course. In our own house, we have quite good collections of books and music, and we also have a collection of cups - tea cups and mugs - that we have picked up at various places along our travels, such as castles and cathedrals.

Now, one of the things about collections like this is that it is often fun to show our collections to other people - and we often have a little story about certain items in our collections that we think are particularly interesting.

Well, in our Gospel this morning, Jesus gives us a little collection of short parables - an anthology we might say - all about the Kingdom of Heaven. And one of those parables is actually about a collector - a collector of pearls:

“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.”

And as with all of Jesus’ parables, it is very familiar - so familiar, in fact, that we might hear it go by and think, “Yes, that makes sense”. But does it really make sense? Like so many of Jesus’ parables, if we stop and think about it, the actions of the main character are actually rather extraordinary.

We’ve been seeing that in the parables Jesus told us the last couple of weeks - about a farmer who scatters his seed recklessly about the countryside, and then recklessly lets weeds grow along with the good plants. Jesus seems to delight in stories that have an unexpected twist to them. My favourite is the one about straining out a gnat, but swallowing a camel. How many of us would fail to notice a camel swimming in our soup and then accidentally swallow it?

So this morning's parable about the pearl merchant also has an unexpected twist. Any collector would want to have the most valuable item possible in his collection - the most prized piece to show off. But, he would want to add such a piece *to* his collection. He wouldn't want to only have that one piece and no others. But Jesus tells us that this particular pearl merchant sold *everything* he owned - including all his other pearls - just to have that one particular prize pearl.

Is that what any of us would do? Would Wayne want to sell all of his other tractors just to have the one best tractor of them all? Would I want to sell all my books just to have the one best book in place of all the rest? It doesn't really make sense, does it?

By selling all of his possessions in order to buy that one pearl, our merchant has given up not only all of his possessions, but his entire profession. He now has only one pearl. Is he going to sell it? That wouldn't make any sense. He just spent all that he had in order to buy it. He isn't going to be able to find someone else who wants to spend even more than he did for that one pearl. He's the one who wanted it, after all.

So what is Jesus trying to tell us in what seems to be yet another odd little story? Well, he is telling us that the Kingdom of Heaven is like that one incredible pearl. He is telling us that the Kingdom of Heaven is so fantastically wonderful, that it is worth giving up absolutely everything else in the entire world to be a part of it. Nothing else compares with it.

And what exactly *is* the Kingdom of Heaven? Well, it isn't a specific place - it isn't *just* in heaven - we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come... on earth as it is in heaven", so it can be anywhere. And it isn't a specific time. Jesus says in Luke 17 that "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

And that pretty much tells us everything we need to know. Jesus could say that the Kingdom of God was in the midst of his listeners, because he himself was with them. The Kingdom of God is wherever and whenever Jesus himself is present among us. And so it is his presence that is so fantastically wonderful that it is worth giving everything else up for.

I found it interesting as I was going through all the favourite hymns we would be singing this morning that there seemed to be a common theme in most of them - that they did, indeed, speak about how fantastic our relationship is with Jesus and how wonderful his presence with us is.

And it is especially true of the hymn we will be singing next - Be Thou My Vision - one of those dear Celtic hymns that expresses our joy in the presence of Jesus - written 13 centuries ago by a blind Irish poet, expressing how our Lord Jesus is absolutely everything to him:

Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise,
Thou mine inheritance, now and always:
Thou and thou only, the first in my heart,
Great God of heaven, my treasure thou art.

Amen!

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