

The Pearl of Great Price

Matthew 13:33, 44-46, (Romans 8:26-28, 31-39)

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC, Camden, July 26, 2020

³¹ [Jesus] told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³² Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches." ³³ He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds^[g] of flour until it worked all through the dough." ... ⁴⁴ "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. ⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

This past week has left the rancid smell and sting of tear gas obstructing our vision for our country. As demonstrations calling for racial justice and investigations into police conduct continue, so has the escalation of the use of force. While there have been a few violent demonstrators, the vast majority have been peaceful. We have seen questionable arrests and use of federal agents with unmarked vehicles. Rather than bringing calm, we have seen a ramping up of confrontations. Governors, mayors and the president have been exchanging verbal attacks over how to establish a semblance of peace, who has the authority to decide the process, and what has to actually change. Calls like "No justice, no peace!" on the one side and "We must establish law and order" on the other are clashing on the streets and on the airwaves. I hear an echo of the Prophet Jeremiah's words (6:14): "They have treated the wounds of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." Thank goodness for the "wall of mothers" who are sending a clear, brave, and peaceful message on behalf of all our children.

I imagine all of us have experienced various emotions in response to the images from Portland, Oregon, to Louisville, Kentucky, and other cities, ranging all the way from rage to worry over the health of our democracy and citizen's rights, sadness and exhaustion. Meanwhile, economic hardship is ramping up in communities all over the country as we await action from Congress on how to stem a potential flood of evictions, address the growing mental health crisis, the rising of COVID-19 infections and so much more. All this is complicated by the high stakes of a major national election coming our way.

Like so many of you, I aspire to stand in solidarity with all people whose lives have been hurt by injustice and systemic abuses. People under threat are tired of not getting heard and seeing adequate change. As you well know, I also believe that those of us who benefit from privileges based on the color of our skin must work to change a prejudicial system that favors the wealthy and privileges “whites.” I am also glad that we are also seeking, as a congregation, to stand in solidarity with people of all colors in our area who need extra financial and logistical support during this pandemic. We do this as we actively ask ourselves: What vision do we have for a different life together? What are the values and visions that guide our discernment in these difficult times?

To help people find the way, Jesus offered images and metaphors. He sought to lure people of his time, and us today, out of conformity with the status quo into creativity and greater shared freedom. Jesus often used the metaphor of the *Kingdom of God* as providing us with a new vision of our belonging to each other. This kingdom is altogether subversive and unconventional, especially when it comes to the notion and use of power. Jesus compares it to a tiny mustard seed and a small leaven that can change the entire make-up and quality of the bread. The mustard plant was known to take over a person’s plantings and was not necessarily desired. Unleavened bread held a high status in the imagination of Jewish people and was directly associated with the story of liberation from slavery in Egypt. Thus, both of these metaphors suggest that God likes to work in unexpected, subversive ways that may well upset our individual and collective apple carts.

The two other metaphors about the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price remind us that it takes serious investment, commitment, devotion and effort to actually touch and experience this kingdom as a lived reality. The treasure in the field is discovered by accident. The one finding it immediately springs into action to invests all he has to go buy this field which contains the treasure. His eyes and heart were open to receive it when it came into his life unexpectedly. The merchant has actually been consciously looking for the pearl of great price. He uses all his is experience and expertise to find it and, when he does, also acts immediately and with great resolve to buy it. It is worth all he has got and more! These parables again prompt us to ask: “Do we know what we are looking for? Do we know what is worth all we’ve

got?” Curiously, the parables don’t say what is done with the treasure and the pearl. So if we found it, what do we believe Jesus would want us to do with it? What difference should it be allowed to make?

I would like to tell you a story about a young man who had found the pearl of great price in his life in more ways than one.¹ Our story takes us back to the reign of Christian Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz-Josef (1848-1916). In the late 19th century, a young Jewish man named Shmiel² had just started to make his living by teaching the daughters of a well to do Jewish family the Hebrew Scriptures and its legacy of interpretation (*Torah* and *Talmud*). Educating girls was most unusual. Shmiel delighted in it, partly because he was fond of daughter Miriam. One day, officers of the Emperor arrived and forcibly recruited Shmiel to serve on the war front in Bosnia-Herzegovina. When it became quickly obvious that Shmiel was no good as a soldier, he was put in charge of a small prison full of Bosnian prisoners of war, most likely Muslim. Many of them were traumatized by the fighting.

Shmiel had no experience or interest in keeping people locked up. He had no malice toward anyone. He said to the prisoners, “I will leave the cells unlocked and allow you a major say in how we live together if you promise to take care of each other, serve food on time, keep the prison clean, and make me look good when inspectors come. If we all agree to this, we can all make it home alive. You know your odds of survival are slim if you run away. The army of the Emperor is everywhere.” The prisoners agreed and ran the prison, while Shmiel studied Torah and prayed. They locked themselves in whenever someone came to inspect the prison.

The war went on for some time and the Festival of Passover was soon approaching. Shmiel had no unleavened matzah bread which he needed for the *seder* celebration during which the story of liberation is told. He resolved to visit Miriam and her family for the High Holiday and left the keys to the prison with the prisoners until his return. Miriam’s father was shocked and scared at first but also moved by Shmiel’s deep devotion to God and this story of liberation. So he let him stay and even agreed to let Shmiel and Miriam marry, if she wished, once the war was over.

¹ Daily Good: News that Inspires: “Freedom in Prison: The Story of My Great-Grandfather” by Aryae Coopersmith.

² Shmiel is derived from “Samuel.” Samuel was a primary prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures. He was given the task to choose who would become king of Israel when the people demanded a king against God’s advice.

Thankfully, the prisoners of war kept the prison going and, upon his return, handed him back the keys. He returned to his study of the scriptures and prayer. When the war finally ended, he returned to Miriam and they were married. They moved to the US and raised their family in NYC. By the time great-grandson, Aryae, had his bar-mitzvah (equivalent to our confirmation), Miriam had died. Shmiel was in his 90s but made it to the celebration and offered Aryae a special present. They were a pair of *tefillin* which are small leather boxes filled with a scroll. Devout Jews tie them to their forehead when they pray. The scroll says: *Shema Ysrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad* which means: “Listen Israel, God is God, God is one.” Shmiel was smiling when he encouraged his grandson to wear it every day.

It would take Aryae until his own middle-age and a long evolution of his own faith to appreciate this gift more fully. Now he sees it as a reminder that, “regardless of any kind of prison where we may find ourselves in this world, we can choose, by tying the Oneness of God to everything we do and everyone we see, freedom.” His great-grandfather had known deep in his being that God is one and that all belong as one in God. He was completely devoted to doing his small part of cultivating his relationship with God so that he could be present and aware when God revealed the path forward to him. This relational union with God was his pearl of great price, along with his bride Miriam with whom he lived this oneness in human terms. Because Shmiel was rooted in the love of God, all whom he met were worthy of his love and respect as well. It did not matter whether they were Jews, Christians or Muslims. This conviction gave him the courage to think outside the box, to find a way forward in absurd times that would allow for liberation rather than greater suffering. In a way, Shmiel dove deep for pearls when the waves of circumstance and violence washed over him.

In this time of such polarization amidst injustices, inequities, and a multitude of suffering, how can we dive deep for pearls when such waves close over us?³ I am intrigued by the question of what might it mean to tie the “Oneness of God to everything we do and everyone we see.” Perhaps the mothers stepping up in Portland can teach us something about that. I don’t presume to have the answers but I am encouraged by the grace and love of Christ. I am

³ Please note that I am not trying to give a one to one analogy through this story between the legitimate demonstrations of our day and the debate over the use of force.

touched by the words of the apostle Paul in our passage from Romans: "... the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26)." God will search our hearts to see where and how our yearning and action is grounded in the Spirit (8:27). This is a God who finds ways to "work all things together for good" when we seek God (Romans 8:28) even amidst the tensions and injustices and absurdities of our day. The question is whether we will pay attention to collaborate.

Rather than withdraw in exhaustion, fear or confusion, let us pray boldly for God's guidance, trusting that nothing will have the power to destroy the oneness with God that we have tasted and seen in Christ. Let us devote ourselves to seeking God in prayer beyond our personal opinions, projections, judgments, fears, and aversions. We don't need to know the words. The intentions and aspirations are already there in our hearts and they will carry us to the heart of God. Let us pray that we may be taken deep below the surfaces of things to touch both the suffering and the potential in every person we meet. Let us also take the apostle Paul's encouragement to heart that nothing, not even death, nor rulers, nor injustices, nor viruses, nor the uncertainties of the future (Romans 8:38-39) can separate us from this actual Oneness that we have in the One God. So, let us take heart and dive into the depth of God's love revealed in Christ where our vision, pained by tear gas now, can become clear again and the way forward into love and oneness open. Thanks be to God.