

What's It Worth To You?

Texts: Psalm 105: 1-11; 45b; Charles Burkowski, *Factotum* (see *Bulletin*); Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

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My son Adam was desperate to get a dog. My wife Kate was not. Adam had always loved dogs, and cuddled with every dog he met. Kate had always been indifferent to dogs at best, and opposed to dogs most of the time. She just wasn't a dog person.

In fact, Kate was so *indifferent* to dogs that one of the few arguments she and I have had was about whether a family dog should be allowed in the house in the winter or forced to stay outside in a dog house. She was willing to compromise and let it come in to the basement on very cold days. I wasn't opposed to it sleeping on one of the kids' beds, which she found revolting.

As I said, she was, at best, indifferent to dogs. But because of Adam, we were going to get a dog, one who could come inside. So we'd been looking at the Berea ARF, the Animal Rescue Fund shelter, for about a year, and watching for rescue dogs to be brought in to the Pet Store. But no luck.

For Adam, every dog was the right dog. For Kate, no dog was the right dog. One Saturday at Baldwin Wallace's Community Days, Adam fell in love with a mini golden doodle that he met there, and Kate was forced to take the number of the breeder and promise to look at their website before Adam would agree to take his arms from around this dog's neck. Adam had found his dog, and wanted a relative of the puppy he'd just met.

That night, Adam forced his mom to look at the breeder's website. Kate signed on reluctantly, and started to look at the mini golden doodle puppies. And then she saw Buddy, and she instantly said, "That's my dog."

She called me over and said, "We're going to get this dog." I said, "How much is it?" And she said "\$1450.00." And I said, "Are you kidding me?" And she said, "No, that's my dog. I'll pay whatever they ask to have that dog. I'd pay twice that."

The next day she drove three hours to Indiana to the breeder to get the dog, and three hours back. That was her dog. And she was so worried about little Buddy adjusting that she slept on the couch downstairs next to Buddy's crate for the next two weeks so he wouldn't get scared in his new home.

Finally, I said, "You can't just keep sleeping on the couch like that. Come back to our room." And she compromised, and agreed to come back if Buddy's crate could be next to the bed. That night, before he could go in his crate, Buddy jumped on the bed. He's slept with us there ever since. That was her dog.

In our Biblical stories today, the pearl merchant was like Adam, in love with pearls and on the lookout for the perfect pearl. In the ancient world, pearls were like diamonds to us today: a symbol of wealth and luxury, a symbol of the good life.

Good pearls could be worth millions of dollars, so this pearl merchant really would have to sell everything he had in order to get this one pearl that was the perfect pearl. But he didn't care. Whatever the cost, he had to have that pearl. It was his pearl. What was it worth to him? Everything.

On the other hand, Kate is more like the plowman. Definitely not looking for pearls. Not obsessed with pearls or treasure, but just going about his ordinary day, doing his work, when he stumbles upon a treasure in a field. And having stumbled upon it, the plowman realizes that he has to have it, that it's the difference between a poor, impoverished life and a full, rich life. So he pulls together everything he has and buys the field.

So what is the kingdom of heaven, anyway? It isn't a place, and it isn't a thing. It's what God is doing in the world. The kingdom of heaven is what God is doing in the world. When we say in the Lord's prayer, "Thy kingdom come" it means, "let all that you're doing in the world, O God, come to fruition in me, and in the rest of the world."

Thy kingdom come, God, and let me take my part in it, let me be out there in the world doing what you are doing, God, loving what you love

Jesus himself is the embodiment of the kingdom of God, that is, Jesus in the flesh is what God is doing in the world. When Jesus stands up for the poor, that is what God is doing in the world. It's the kingdom of God.

When Jesus offers mercy to the woman caught in adultery, that's what God is doing in the world. That's where the kingdom of God is.

When Jesus invites the wealthy tax collector to have him over for dinner, and turns the man's heart from greed to generosity, that's what God is doing in the world. That's where the kingdom of God is.

Jesus is the embodiment of the kingdom of God. Jesus is doing what God is doing in the world. Or, put another way, Jesus is what God is doing in the world. Jesus is seeking justice, offering comfort, bringing healing, confronting the powers, embracing the outsider, providing mercy, living out love. Jesus is the embodiment of the kingdom of God.

Now, there are different ways that people can come to get involved with what God is doing in the world, with the kingdom of God.

The pearl merchant is everyone who was looking for God, or maybe even everyone who was desperate for something else that they hoped God could bring them, like an oppressed person looking for justice, or a lonely person looking for love, or a guilty person looking for absolution.

This person knows that they don't have what they need, and maybe they've contented themselves with a pale approximation, with baby pearls instead of the one pearl of great price that they're truly looking for.

Instead of justice, maybe they are contenting themselves with daily survival in a world where a good day is a day when injustice doesn't touch them, but touches someone else instead, a string of good days like a string of small pearls, but not the one pearl they really want.

Or for the person seeking love, instead of true love, maybe they're collecting a pearly string of relationships, of one night stands, of two week encounters, that appease the hunger for love, but never satisfy.

Or for the one seeking absolution, perhaps they content themselves with denying they've done anything wrong, telling themselves that everyone does it, that it's not so bad, that it could have been worse, a string of outs and excuses that look pearly, but aren't the real thing.

But these people are people who are definitely looking for something, and when they see the real thing, instead of the pale approximations, when they see the chance to get real justice, or real love, or real forgiveness, they jump at it. They have to have it. Like the pearl merchant, they've seen the little ones, the ones that don't satisfy, but now they see the real thing, and they have to be a part of it.

Look at the people out protesting in the midst of a pandemic, protesting night after night, weekend after weekend, protesting for justice. They see that God is doing something in the world, right now, to change the world, and they want to be a part of it. God is on the move, and they want to play their role, even though the cost might be high, might be getting beaten or tear-gassed or shot with rubber bullets or dragged off the street by unidentified federal agents in unmarked vans. They've been longing for justice, and now they see the chance of it, and they aren't holding back.

No matter what the cost, this is God's kingdom coming into being, this is justice for Black people coming into reality, and they want to be a part of it. This is what God is doing in the world now, this is where the kingdom of God is happening. Justice for all people, that's the kingdom happening in our midst.

Sure, it's messy, it's not totally there yet, like the net full of good fish and some bad fish, as the parable has it, it needs sorting out, but in the midst of all that messiness, God is at work. Justice is coming. The kingdom is at hand.

Some of the people out in the street looking for justice, defending their right to protest, their right to seek a better world, some of these people are like the plowman.

These are the people who didn't know how important something was to them until they're in the midst of it. Not every person out on the street protesting for justice was thinking about justice at all a few months ago. Many, maybe most of them, were simply going about life, until they stumbled upon a video that shook them out of their complacency, that was so unjust, so wrong that they had to do something about it.

Maybe it was the George Floyd video. Maybe it was the police driving a car through protesters or tear gassing moms or snatching people off the street. Whatever it was, they stumbled upon it, and the injustice upset them, and they realized they had to be a part of making things right. They saw God making a change, the kingdom of God coming, and they had to take their place, and do their part. It might cost them friendships. It might cost them relationships with some of their family members. But doing what's right, it's what is driving them.

Jesus says that this is what the kingdom of heaven is like: it might be something you're looking for, or it might be just something that you stumble upon, but once you see it, you just have to have a part in it. You're ready to give up anything in order to have your place in it.

It is the pearl of great price that you've been looking for your whole life. It is the treasure hidden in the field, that you didn't know existed, but once you stumble upon it, you know you have to have it.

The parables today challenge us deeply. They challenge us to look for what God is doing in the world, and to act. What is it that God is doing that excites you, that you must be part of?

It doesn't have to be protests about injustice and racism, of course. It could be the fight against hunger, or the challenge of homelessness, or the safeguarding of voting rights, or the protection of LGBTQ rights, or improving the treatment of women, or some other thing entirely.

Jesus says at one point, "The kingdom of heaven is within you," which means that God is at work within you, to change you and to change the world through you. Look inside to see what God wants you to do, to see what excites you in your understanding of the world God is creating, and play your part.

So whether you're like the pearl merchant, already looking for something God is doing, or more like the plowman, not looking for anything, but suddenly stumbling across something incredibly exciting that God is doing in the world, find the kingdom in yourself, and get excited about it. You'll know you've found it when you're ready to put everything you've got into it, when you, like Jesus, are ready to embody God's kingdom, when you are ready to be what God is doing in the world.
Amen