

Finding Pearls in the Parables

by Rev. Durrell Watkins , M.A., M.Div.

Sunshine Cathedral

July 27th, 2008 Matthew 13.44-46

When my great-aunt Gladys turned 80, she decided it was time for a new lease on life. I didn't realize how serious she was about it until I called her one day and heard this message on her answering machine. The message said, "I am not available right now, but thank you very much for your call. I can't come to the phone because I'm making some changes in my life, so leave a message. If I don't return your call, you're one of the changes."

We may need to make some changes today; we may need to change the way we think about ourselves. We may need, as Solomon did, to pray for understanding so that we will learn of our enormous potential and sacred value.

Matthew 13 is full of parables. All throughout chapter 13, we've been hearing about this counter-kingdom, this non-empire, this kin-dom or kingdom of heaven. This kingdom is universal, embracing everyone, bringing wholeness and dignity to all people without exception. In the kingdom of God, there are no untouchables, no one is unlovable, and no one is beyond the experience of grace.

How is the kin-dom of God different from the power structures of the world? The kin-dom of God or "heaven" is like one who sows good seed into good ground, reaping a bountiful harvest.

The kin-dom of heaven is like a wheat farm that some miscreant contaminated with a lot of weeds. But the weeds and the wheat can be harvested together and then the weeds will be separated from the wheat.

The kin-dom of heaven is like a mustard seed...it's tiny, but once it takes root it continues to grow and thrive outrageously.

The kin-dom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field. If someone were to somehow stumble across the treasure she might sell everything she had so she could buy the field and see what other treasures were buried in it.

The kin-dom of heaven is like a jeweller who comes across an exquisite pearl who then goes to great lengths to be able to own that pearl.

The kin-dom of heaven is like a net that is thrown into the sea, which collects fish of every kind. When the net is full, the fishers haul it ashore and put the good fish into buckets and throw the unwanted fish back.

What is Matthew trying to say? I'm sure you've heard these passages interpreted to mean that some people are embraced by God and others are discarded. The good seeds that go into good ground give a 100 fold return, but the seeds that land on rocky or shallow ground just don't make it. The wheat and the weeds are harvested together but the only the wheat is saved; the weeds are tossed into a fire. The fish are all snatched up, but only the good ones are keepers, the bad ones are rejected.

But in the midst of these stories, there are two other ones...about a treasure, and a pearl. They are all connected as if they are sharing a message, and that leads me to believe that exclusionary interpretations where some of us are chosen by God and others are tossed away are not the point Matthew is trying to make.

I think of how often Matthew makes the case that those who have been rejected by society, in fact have a home in the kin-dom of heaven.

You see, in the Roman Empire , people were disposable. Rebels could be publicly executed, as Jesus was. Children weren't considered persons. People could be sold into slavery. Women had no status apart from a father or husband. In an imperial system, some people are disposable; but the Jesus Way is a clear alternative to that system.

The Jesus Way offers the Kingdom, or Kin-dom of God over against the way of empire. And the Kin-dom, the family of God is a utopian ideal wherein everyone would be valued and everyone would be affirmed and everyone would be treated with compassion and respect. The kin-dom of heaven is a life of love that leaves no one out.

I remember Matthew telling us about Jesus' lineage. He is very careful to remind us that his ancestors include Tamar who prostituted herself in order to have a baby. Jesus' ancestors include Ruth, the Moabite...the Moabites were the enemies of the Israelites. Rahab, another prostitute, was another of Jesus' ancestors. Bathsheba was one of Jesus' ancestors who was seduced by King David and conceived a child while her husband Uriah was serving in the military. And Jesus' own mother became pregnant by some means other than with her fiancée, Joseph.

The ancients made a point of sharing genealogies because to know one's ancestry said something about the person in question. Jesus, the one Matthew insists is the Messiah, is the descendant of two prostitutes, a Moabite pagan, an adulterous union between David and Bathsheba, and a mother who conceives out of wedlock, and HE is the Messiah. Who would ever be excluded from THIS Good News? The people others would judge or condemn are the ones God chooses as the lineage of the Messiah! And that's how Matthew opens his gospel.

In chapter 2, Matthew shows us some Persian astrologers, priests of a cult who worshiped a fire-god and who used occult practices to predict the future. These Persian astrologers or Magi, just as they are find the Messiah, offer him gifts, and then, just as they are, return to their homeland and to their own religion.

Matthew says that a leper approached Jesus and asked him for healing; and Jesus immediately stretched out his hand and touched him. According to Jesus' religion, he couldn't touch someone with leprosy, that would make HIM unclean, but he touched the untouchable and affirmed his dignity and recognized his wholeness regardless of what his religion said.

In Matthew chapter 8, a Roman centurion who would have been a member of the imperial cult, a Roman pagan involved in emperor worship comes to Jesus to have him heal his male companion, his "servant."

The Greek word that Matthew uses is "pais" and would have been understood to have a romantic implication. And Jesus not only heals the pagan centurion's male lover he also praises his faith!

Later, Jesus went to a local ruler's house. The ruler's daughter was thought to be dead, but Jesus touched her and restored life within her; but again, in Jesus' tradition, if he had touched a dead body that would have contaminated him. But he broke the rules to affirm life and dignity. The love of Jesus is a radically inclusive love that up-ends the status quo and lifts up every human-being.

These are the stories that lead up to Matthew 13 and these parables. This is the Jesus Matthew has been presenting to us. This Jesus isn't saving a few and rejecting others! This Jesus isn't saying "everyone in OUR club is OK and everyone else is screwed." This Jesus is proclaiming a kin-dom whose law is love and whose defence is hope. It is a kin-dom of good news for ALL people, especially for those who have so far been left out.

So what do these parables mean? They aren't about casting people out; they are about bringing in and lifting up the people who have been left out!

The kin-dom of heaven is like when we sow positive thoughts into a receptive consciousness that then produces 30, 60, even 100 times more hope, goodwill, and peace than what we started with. The more we practice optimism, the more reasons to be optimistic seem to show up. There is hope for everyone.

The kin-dom of heaven is like a mind full of thoughts and feelings, wheat and weeds, positive and negative. But when we bundle them all up, when we examine our thoughts and feelings, we can discard the ones that are dragging us down and holding us back; we can choose to keep only the thoughts of love and hope and joy. There is abundant life for everyone.

The kin-dom of heaven is like a mustard seed...it's small, but properly planted in the right place will produce a plant that will flourish. The tiniest dream nurtured with hope and determination can grow into huge dream, and then into a blessed reality. There are dreams to be dreamed by everyone.

The kin-dom of heaven is like a treasure...once you find that within yourself there is the very presence of God then you will give anything to live in the power of that realization. You no longer possess the treasure, it possess ...it is YOU.

You've given away everything unlike the treasure so that you can live in the bounty of It, the positive outlook, the joyful attitude. It is the pearl you have been looking for, and now that you have found it, you won't let the condemnations and fears and judgments of others take it away from you, ever. There is affirmation for everyone.

In The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "don't throw your pearls before swine...they'll just trample them and then turn and tear you to pieces." And here in chapter 13, the pearl metaphor is used again. These stories aren't saying that some of us will be thrown away; they are telling us to throw away any attitude that prevents us from celebrating the truth of God's love for us, in us, expressing as us.

The kin-dom of God is a place where every person is a neighbour, and every neighbour is treated with dignity, and every person knows himself or herself to be a child of God, an heir of the universal kin-dom of infinite Good.

Keep the affirming thoughts, the thoughts and attitudes that build up, that inspire, that give hope, that offer joy, keep that wheat, keep that harvest, keep those delicious fish, keep that treasure, that pearl of great price, and discard whatever is preventing you from knowing that YOU cannot be discarded!

You are a person of sacred and eternal value. Don't throw the pearl of your innate goodness to the swine – the fears and prejudices and resentments. Discover the pearl of your being and treasure it and celebrate it and never settle for anything less. This is what Jesus is telling us. This is the good news! Amen.

© Durrell Watkins , 2008

- I am a great treasure.**
- I am a cherished child of God.**
- I deserve Good in my life.**
- I expect and accept blessings now...**
- Because I believe in God's love.**
- And so it is!**
- Amen.**