



KINGDOM EIPHANIES

The Paradox: Seeking A Trade-Up

January 21, 2024

Prelude – To Know You by Citizens

WELCOME (cards & community) |

Good morning, all! I'm so glad we can gather together this morning as the church. **To come together on this day made for us, a day where we awoke into our Father's work finished.** A day to rest in God with us, God for us. A day to set our minds' attention and hearts' affection upon Jesus, so that we might be the church, spiritual companions in gospel community, following Jesus together in our ordinary roles and relationships.

To be the church, that's the aim of our worship together, remembering whose and who we are in Jesus.

So, for those new with us, we are glad you're here, and **we'd like to invite you to church**, into the relationships that make the church truly a faith family through Jesus. Your first step would be to fill out one of the little black cards found on the table when you first walked in. You can drop them off in the jar on that table or one of the little boxes at the back of the chapel. And a great time to do this would be in just a few minutes when we dismiss our kiddos back to their particular time and place for worship!

Speaking of a time and place for worship, will you join me in settling our hearts and minds upon the truth that God is with us, here and now, as we enter into worship through scripture and song, conversation, and communion? Pray with me.

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 63:1-8

O God, you are my God; **earnestly I seek you**; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

SONG #1 – Oh How I Need You by All Sons and Daughters

SONG #2 – Jesus Is by Paper Horses

Dismiss Kids

CALL BACK & ANNOUNCEMENTS | Getting Ready

As you return to your seats, I wanted to remind you to grab a pen and a reflection card. Once again, we'll enter into a story Jesus tells. It is a story meant to stir our imagination of life with God and God with us. **It is a story that encourages us to exercise faith, open our eyes, unclog our ears, and sharpen our hearts through dialogue, a conversation with the Spirit through the scriptures and with one another at the feet of Jesus to whom we are apprenticed.**

We are accustomed to coming to Jesus's words, particularly his parables, looking for pearls of truth, valued insights, and answers to help us achieve a life full and forever, or at least make it through the day. And you know what? Often, we find what we are looking for! But, as we discussed [last week](#), what if Jesus wants more for us? What if his intention isn't merely to give us what we are after, but abundantly more than we could ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20-21)? What if Jesus wanted us to *become* something more than we have in our minds, to grow into, mature into ones,

trained in the kingdom of heaven...like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. (Matthew 13:52)

The more, it turns out, begins with "a ready heart," an eager openness to life with God as God sees it, a hunger and thirst for right relating as Jesus put it (Matt. 5:6). The prerequisite isn't to have it all figured out, but to know you don't. And in your poor spirit, not despairing what you don't have, but, as the psalmist sang, "earnestly seeking," going after it with a humble, joyous curiosity.

Even a small act like grabbing a pen and paper can help us posture our hearts, ready our hearts for the word and words to come, a conversation with Jesus and one another to give us insight and help us mature in life with God together.

Pray with me and then allow the words of Jesus read by _____ to ready our hearts for today's parable and dialogue.

PRE-SERMON READING | Matthew 13:10-17

The disciples came up and asked, "Why do you tell stories?" He replied, "You've been given insight into God's kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn't been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That's why I tell stories: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight. In their present state they can stare till doomsday and not see it, listen till they're blue in the face and not get it. I don't want Isaiah's forecast repeated all over again: Your ears are open but you don't hear a thing. Your eyes are awake but you don't see a thing. The people are blockheads! They stick their fingers in their ears so they won't have to listen; They screw their eyes shut so they won't have to look, so they won't have to deal with me face-to-face and let me heal them. "But you have God-blessed eyes—eyes that see! And God-blessed ears—ears that hear! A lot of people, prophets and humble believers among them, would have given anything to see what you are seeing, to hear what you are hearing, but never had the chance.

SERMON | Seeking A Trade-Up

There is a beautiful paradox in life with God: a life lived in His presence and towards His purposes, a life lived in what our scriptures call the Kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven.

"the Kingdom of God, on the one hand is sheer grace, all achieved *for us*, and, if we will let him, achieved *in us* by Christ...on the other hand, to find it, to recognize it, to yearn for it, is to let go of everything else."

(Malcolm Guite)

On the one hand, such a life is what we are made for, and so it is, as T.S. Elliot phrased it¹, "A condition of complete simplicity," our natural state. And, having been made for such an existence, it is, therefore, a reality of "sheer grace, all achieved *for us*," says Malcolm Guite, and "achieved *in us* by Christ,"² as our gospels attest and first parables described.

On the other hand, this life we are made for, a life which we are returned to by Jesus, costs "not less than everything." To "find it, to recognize it, to yearn for it," continues Guite, "is to let go of everything else," as our stories last week and today expound.

And there is the central paradox, the seemingly contradictory reality, of life with God: admission is free and frees us of all we have. Life with God is where our true selves and purpose are found, and at the same time, it is the place where we lose ourselves in our finding. But here is where the paradox becomes doubly ironic: the "selling all that we have to buy" into this life is not a vow of poverty but a readiness for, an earnest seeking after a trade-up!

In our [opening parables from Luke](#), the Kingdom of God finds us. Life with God is a life where we are *found and brought home to our place, and our purpose (value) is restored*. In our two parables in Matthew, the kingdom of heaven, life with God lived in His presence and towards His purposes, is ***an abundant life we find and a drive to keep finding***.

Once again, we'll attempt to enter into one of Jesus' shorter parables by putting our divinely gifted faculty of imagination to work. Remember, the goal is not solely a single propositional truth but to develop an understanding that allows us to bring out the new and old richness (Matt. 13:52), an understanding we come to not in isolation but in dialogue. Dialogue with the Spirit and with Jesus in a community of Jesus followers.

To begin, I want to read the parable and point out a couple of things to prime us for the following meditation and dialogue. Cool? Okay, here we go! Jesus speaking,

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:45-46)

This story sounds similar to the one before, but notice there are differences. For one, last Sunday's parable said, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden" (Matt. 13:44). Life with God, in that story, is described as *something we find, a treasure we discover, maybe trip over in an ordinary if not familiar place*. So, life with God is something of

¹ T.S. Elliot, "Little Gilding," in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 200.

² Malcolm Guite, *Lifting The Veil: imagination and the kingdom of God*, 87.

life-altering value which we run into, recognize as life-changing, and so, change our life, selling everything to take ownership of not only the kingdom but where the kingdom is found, in the place where life is made.

Today's parable, however, doesn't depict the kingdom of heaven as an object of great value. Remember what we just read, "the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls" (Matt. 13:45). Life with God in today's story is described as *someone who is always on the lookout for something of tremendous value*. Life with God is searching, seeking, and finding what we are after, recognizing something worth changing our life, and selling all that we have found to claim something more of the same, a whole, singular manifestation of tremendous beauty.

Here are a couple more things to note before our imaginative exercise. The first is something that is *not* said but often assumed, which I am guilty of assuming. Generally, people read this story and assume the merchant is trading in pearls, but neither the text nor cultural history demands such a conclusion.

The word used for "merchant" literally means "**one on a journey, whether by sea or by land, especially for traffic**"³ or to trade. The fact that the character is a merchant means their vocation, whether selling linens, spices, or other goods, would put them in port or seaside cities where one might find pearls. Objects that one scholar notes "were regarded as the most valuable and beautiful objects in existence, so they became a figure of speech for something of supreme worth"⁴ and beauty. So, a merchant by occupation would have more access to pearls compared to, say, a farmer, even if the merchant was not dealing in pearls.

Second, while there is some debate among scholars, theologians, and pastors/preachers, the words used for the phrase describing what was sold, "all that," or more literally, "all things, as many as he had" in the second story (v. 46) seem to be *a reference to the merchant's previous finds: i.e., other pearls*. While similar to the preceding story, the implication is that the merchant has found the value in life with God but is always on the search for more of what has been found, and willing to "abandon...or relinquish" what he already possesses for more of what he already has.

Though there are differences, what we see in both parables, is whether on land or by sea, found by stumbling onto or searching out, life with God, as Jesus said to begin His ministry, requires us to turn (repent...be found) and change everything (come home, buy life wholly, purchase the same but new):

Times up! God's kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message, the good news. (Mark 1:15)

Okay, with all that in mind, let's work our way into and through the parable of the merchant, or as I like to call it, "the parable of being ready for a trade-up"! A slight change from what we did last week: when we get to the questions throughout the story, the questions will appear on the screens, and I'll pause for a minute for you to consider.

Like last week, let's begin by taking three deep breaths. With each breath in, envision the Spirit of God with us filling your lungs, and as you exhale, envision expelling your distractions—fear, anxiety, boredom, apathy, confusion, assumptions, pride, etc.

Now, close your eyes and imagine yourself as a successful business person—a competent trade person.

³ Thayer's Greek Lexion, [accessed here](#).

⁴ Kylene Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: a comprehensive guide to the parables of Jesus*, 250.

Years of apprenticeship, hard work, and God's gracious fortune have allowed you to build up a comfortable life and profitable profession in the textile trade. Buying and selling woven wonders expanded to trading the resources needed for their production: wool, silk, dyes, etc. The regional development of your services has meant you've spent more than your fair share of time in ports and seaside towns.

Early in your profession, you discovered the beauty and value of fine pearls. A treasure not so common in your land-locked hometown. Immediately, these precious miracles of creation had your affection and your longing. While some people seek after them as a hobby or in wishful aspirations of stumbling on the winning lottery ticket, you've made the search for these little treasures an obsession. At least that's how your family, friends, and even employees refer to it!

Your years of seeking and finding have given you a keen eye for what you encounter. You know what is what. You can tell the difference between a beautiful, excellent pearl and one of lesser value, and you are always on the lookout for the best and only the best and more of the best.

You've found many fine pearls over the years on all your travels, pearls of immense value that have brought you much of what you enjoy in your life now, both internally and externally: your leisure, peace of mind, and satisfaction. It turns out this obsession has as much to do with the quality of your daily living as your profession.

You've sought out the beautiful and found their value in everyday life. Yet your pursuits and discoveries have kept you hungry for more, not out of greed or lust to merely have more, but because it is inconceivable to you not to continue to seek the goodness of such things.

- What's life like being comfortable but not complacent, driven because of what you have tasted, seeking because you have found?

One day, on your usual trade journey, waiting for the transfer of goods sold and bought, you go for a walk through the booths of a small coastal village. The saltiness of the sea air fills your nostrils while the sound of bartering and begging fills your ears, and the little amount of space between you and the vendors. And that's when you catch a glimpse of something exceeding your expectations. You are on the lookout for the best pearls, but this pearl, sitting on the back of a vendor's table in an elegant box atop a crimson pillow, takes your breath away.

- What goes through your head when you discover what you are always looking for, and find that it is more wonderful, more beautiful, more impressive than even you, one learned and on the lookout for the finest, could have imagined?

You approach the vendor slyly, trying not to give away your amazement at the discovery, hoping to get a good deal on the most exquisite pearl you've ever encountered. You can't help, despite all your experience, but to be a bit nervous about the ensuing haggle. You take a deep breath and ask, "How much for that one in the back?" motioning with your eyes, hoping not to draw too much attention to the pearl or your excitement. To your dismay, the vendor knows his pearls too. He will not part with this one at a bargain, perhaps not at all, as you soon discover.

- What emotions do you feel when you begin to realize that what you desire, what you've always sought after and found in various forms here and there but not like this, what you are beginning to need, is going to cost more than you expect, that there will be no compromising on its price?

Perhaps you could live without this pearl, you think. But almost as quickly as the thought crosses your mind, you know it's not true. All your finds to this point, every fine pearl before, every good from them, as incredible as it all has been, can never compare to this thing of beauty and value in front of you. If you walk away now, without the pearl, all that you possess in pearls, in life, will be dulled, grayed by the memory of what you discovered but willfully left behind.

Being a diligent entrepreneur, you quickly calculate the value of all that you found and possessed over the years, all those fine pearls hard-earned and graced, the finds that have brought you comfort, peace of mind, safety, satisfaction, and a future. In a moment of surreal speech, you offer the merchant the totality of your life's committed obsession.

- What does it feel like to make the offer, to hear the words coming off your lips, as you release all that you hold on to in hopes of gaining this wonderful treasure?

Upon making your offer, you half expect the merchant to turn you down, but instead, you hear an affirmation of acceptance; "That will cover it."

- What does it feel like to have your offer accepted, knowing what comes with its acceptance, both the cost and the prize?

You arrange with the merchant a timeline for return and payment in full so that you can make what is now yours, truly yours. As you return home, you begin the process of selling off all those fine but lesser pearls. It will not take too long to liquidate...after all, you've been a diligent seeker and a competent finder, and the quality items you are unloading are evident.

Finally, the day arrives when you exchange what has been good for what is grand. You hand the vendor his price and take possession of the precious, of great value, tremendous beauty, the thing you've sought your entire life.

- What do you feel at this moment? Will you stop seeking and searching for fine pearls? Will your obsession be satisfied, or will your hunger and thirst increase?

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION | Responding to the Light of Jesus

- Are you seeking things of great value, beauty, and worth?
- Are you satisfied with what you've found, or, while content, is there a drive for what you've found that keeps you on the lookout for more?
- In what ways does this description of life with God as someone seeking to find something they know/have, and more of it, inform your daily roles and relationships?

SONG #3 – To Know You by Citizens

COMMUNION |

...for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

(Hebrews 11:6)

--

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the LORD...

(Jeremiah 29:13-14)

--

--

Christ's body and blood: for us, they were given.

This bread and this cup tell us we're forgiven.

We have sought, and we have found,

Our life in His.

Amen

SONG #4 – Great Is Thy Faithfulness

BENEDICTION | Colossians 3:1-2

As we rest in the day made for us, we prepare to enter into the work for which we are made [**LIGHT THE CANDLE**], remembering:

So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, *act* like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ—that's where the action is. See things from *his* perspective.