

July 30, 2017, 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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**Focus:** Jesus gives us the kingdom of heaven.

As we approach the season of the church year known as Yard Sale (August 11-12), I'm reminded of the phrase, "One person's trash is another's treasure." Unlike water, food, and air that are valuable because we need them to survive, sometimes beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Try as we might, in past yard sales, it took us a couple days to sell the hot dog maker or the bacon waver. I imagine the treasure and the pearl in today's parables from Jesus actually work the same way for a lot of people. A piece of gold or a pearl isn't actually going to do something for you. It's only treasure because people say it's beautiful, they say it's valuable, they say it's worth it.

What is something worth to you? You see, the other thing coming up this time of year is the start of the school year. In the school year, you have to ask, is it worth it?

--Is getting into the college or program that I want worth all the heartache of Algebra II or World History?

--Is being a part of a winning sports team worth waking up to do 6am training sessions at the gym all summer?

--Teachers, is helping kids reach their goals worth being the first folks in the building and grading homework long after other people's working day is over?

--Is seeing what your students can achieve worth all the times that individuals are going to disappoint you or cause you heartache?

--Parents, is it worth all the hours driving your kids to events, or going to parent-teacher conferences, spending hundreds of dollars on required books and equipment for "public" education, or nagging your kids when to do homework or turn off the lights for the night, or get up in the morning in order to see your kids achieve their goals?

Beyond the things you learn in class or being on a team or in a club, school teaches a lot of life lessons for everyone: from the principal down to the 1<sup>st</sup>-day kindergartener in the Paw Patrol backpack. One of those things is deciding what's valuable. What am I willing to put first? What am I willing to work hard at, to give up a lot of other things to achieve my goal, to find my treasure, or my pearl of great price? What's worth it?

I think that's what two of today's many parables in the Gospel story are about. The person walking in the field who stumbles upon this great treasure realizes immediately that he has to sell everything he has to afford the field for the sake of this one treasure. Or the merchant who probably sells many things: pearls, gems, and other treasures, but who when he finds the right treasure: the pearl of great price shoves everything aside, sells everything else he owns, and buys this one pearl. Think about the sacrifice. What would they have to give up? For the merchant, it's clear: all his other wares that he sells. For the person walking in the field, we have no idea whether he was a field hand or just a random person walking through, but clearly whatever he was, he has to give it all up. He is risking his food, his home, his day-to-day existence for the sake of this one treasure. Because to him it is worth it.

Around this time last year, this article ran in *Forbes Magazine*.

Just about 10 years ago, a Filipino fisherman made an amazing discovery in the sea off the coast of the Palawan Island, Philippines: a two-foot long (26 inches to be exact) pearl inside a giant clam. He took it home and hid it under his bed – keeping it as a good luck charm. Recently, his tiny home burned down, but the 75-pound pearl survived. Via officials in the Philippines, the pearl has been verified at 26 inches in length, 12 inches in width and weighing nearly 75 pounds. It is valued at \$100 Million.<sup>1</sup>

\$100 million. That’s amazing, isn’t it? Even with this man’s home burned down, this fisherman can afford to replace everything because of the surpassing worth of this one pearl. What also stands out to me is that it’s not clear this man even knew what he was getting into. Unlike the merchant in our story searching through different gems, this was no expert, just a fisherman out to sea. It’s much more like the man who discovers the treasure in the field, an accidental discovery. From that point on, though, his life is changed. Once he has acquired this treasure, it rearranges his life because he knows that no matter what happens, even if his house burns down, he has security. He will never again have to worry. This pearl, after-all, is worth \$100 million.

Brothers and sisters, if a hunk of white rock that grew inside a clam is worth \$100 million, how much more valuable is the gift that we have received from Jesus! The pearl in this news story was given to one fisherman who we imagine went out to his boat the next day. When Jesus gave his pearl to the disciples, they cast aside their nets and became fishers of people. The pearl in the news survived a house burning down. The pearl that Jesus gives to us survives the sting of death. The pearl the man discovered was hidden under his bed. The pearl given to us has grown into the kingdom of God in every race and nation. The pearl that the Filipino man discovered is worth \$100 million. But the pearl given to us is worth even more than that: it’s priceless.

In our baptism, we have received the greatest gift. Martin Luther said, “No greater jewel, therefore, can adorn our body and soul than baptism, for through it we become completely holy and blessed, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire.” There is no greater jewel sunk in the sea or buried in the field than baptism in this font. Baptism is our pearl of great price.

Throughout this school year, and throughout your life, you will set goals. Some of them you will achieve. Some of them you will fail. You will ask yourself over and over again, “is this really worth it?”

Baptism is a lot like that, too. Many people look at the gift of baptism and see no more than a trinket—knockoff jewelry or even a used hot dog maker. How, they ask, can water do such great things? How can a baby who doesn’t show any signs of believing receive the promises of the kingdom of heaven? Why should something that happened so long ago that I might not have even chosen myself make a claim on me to give up so much of my time, my talent, my money, of who I am to this life of discipleship?

Look, I can’t persuade anyone to value or to treasure baptism. I can’t convince anyone that the life of discipleship it commits us to is worth it.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertanaas/2016/08/23/100-million-pearl-hidden-under-bed-sets-world-record-as-largest-most-expensive-pearl-in-the-world/#53789fb879b0>

But what I can say is what baptism promises: In a life when we work so hard to meet our goals, baptism promises that from the moment a drop of water fell on your head, you have already made it. In a life when we sometimes come up short of our own standards or goals, baptism promises that you can't fail out of the kingdom of heaven. In a life where one person's trash is another's treasure, baptism's value comes not from the eye of the beholder, but from the fact that the Son of God himself gave his life for it, for you, and for all who come through these waters.

Like the man who stumbled upon the treasure in the field, baptism came to us before we knew what it was, but like the merchant searching through the pearls, finding it is our life's work. When we've stumbled upon it, when we understand his promises to us of eternal life, his forgiveness of all our sins, in a word: his love for us, what can we do but go out with joy? What can we do but sell off every other distraction in our lives that makes this pearl seem unaffordable? What can we do but make this pearl of great price the goal of our life's work, to put everything that we do, everything that we say, everything that we are in the service of its priceless worth?

You know the difference between pearls and every other gem? Pearls are alive. They grow. And that's what the kingdom of heaven is like. What starts as a small pearl when one person is baptized grows into a life of discipleship. And when that life of discipleship grows, it spreads to others: through words of faith and acts of love. It's not until the end that we see the full picture and realize its true value. It's not until the end that we see that that pearl has become something richer still: the kingdom of heaven.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus went to the cross to give us this priceless pearl. This is our treasure, and it is worth every cost. **Amen.**