

“The Priceless Pearl in My Life”

7/30/17, St. Ann  
Fr. Jim Plough

What I like most about Jesus’ parables, his metaphorical stories, is that they provide more questions than answers. Today Jesus describes a treasure buried in a field and a priceless pearl that someone gave everything they had to acquire. In fact, Jesus is asking today what matters most to you? What is your treasure, your pearl, that you’d give everything you have to make your own or that you’ve already acquired as your own. The treasure and pearl are simply metaphors for something else. Today’s gospel story is about what matters most to you. What is that something else for you?

Our Scriptures begin with the Lord asking Solomon what mattered most to him. I’ll give you whatever you ask for. Solomon does not ask for a long life or for riches or for the life of his enemies. He says, “Lord, to lead my people as their king I need an understanding heart. I need to know what’s best for my people. I need to do what is right for them.” Ever after, we have called this response the “wisdom” of Solomon.

Today’s psalm presents the same message in a different way. Psalm 119 says “Lord, I love your commands.” Torah was more than commands. Whether phrased as law or rules or decrees, precepts or teaching, Torah expressed the way God wills the world to be. Torah shows the way, provides the understanding, the wisdom, for doing what is right.

What is the treasure, the pearl, in your life that shows you the way?

Here are two stories about Torah, about what really matters. Anthony De Mello was a Jesuit spiritual director in India a generation ago. He loved to tell stories about Eastern traditions that illuminate gospel truths. (Tomorrow happens to be the Feast of Saint Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits. I am told that there are more Jesuits in India today than in any other part of the world!)

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De Mello’s story is called “The Diamond.” The wise man had reached the outskirts of the village and settled down under a tree for the night when a villager came running up to him and said, “The stone! The stone! Give me the precious stone.”

“What stone?” asked the wise man, “Last night God appeared to me in a dream,” said the villager, “and told me that if I went to the outskirts of the village at dusk, I should find a wise man who would give me a precious stone that would make me rich forever.” The wise man rummaged in his bag and pulled out a stone. “He probably meant this one,” he said, as he handed the stone over to the villager. “I found it on a forest path some days ago. You can certainly have it.”

The man gazed at the stone in wonder. It was a diamond; probably the largest diamond in the whole world, for it was as large as a person’s head. He took the diamond and walked away. All night he tossed about in bed, unable to sleep. The next day at the crack of dawn he woke the wise man and said, “Give me the wealth that makes it possible for you to give this diamond away so easily.” Give me wisdom.

What matters most in your life? What is your treasure, your precious pearl of inestimable value?

My second story highlights the question of what matters most in a heart-wrenching and powerful way. It is the story told by a priest who had presided over the funeral of four young children, brothers and sisters of a divorced, single mother. The children had perished in a house fire.

The mother, who was a dance instructor, had been teaching her children to dance “liturgical dance.” Basically these are movements of the arms, head, and body in graceful uplifting motions that suggest prayer, humility, and thanksgiving to God. The children had been excited about learning this new way to pray and would practice by dancing around the house.

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At the funeral, this bereaved and emotionally shattered mother had the presence of mind to dance around the four little white caskets in gestures of amazing grace and reverence, all the while communicating a sense of grief but also joy and hope. At the conclusion of her dance, the mother walked up to the pulpit and said that she had always considered her treasure to be her four children and now they had been taken away from her. But she had found another pearl of great price, one she would never give away. That pearl and that treasure was her faith that God would wipe away her tears and his grace would “fix and heal her broken heart.”

Her faith was her treasure – a treasure she said had lain buried but now, in her grief, had been found again and she could speak with gratitude to God for having blessed her life for these short years with her beautiful children, the great pearls that had adorned their time together. The dance was her parable, the way she expressed the mystery of her deep faith at a time when all that was treasure to her had been taken away. She found a treasure she never knew existed, a solitary pearl of faith and trust in God.

In Biblical times a pearl was a symbol of wisdom. Like Solomon, this mother found an understanding heart and even in her unfathomable grief, the small taste of joy could never be taken away from her. Her faith gave her a mighty heart and her dance, performed with a body wracked from pain of loss, released the energy of a trusting spirit.

Like the woman herself, mourners left the church that day having discovered treasures they never knew existed.

While making the rounds in the Intensive Care Unit at St. Mary’s Hospital last Friday, I visited a lady whose name was Dee. She was in a coma. She had been out for a walk and was hit by a truck. Her husband was there, totally distraught. He said to me “she’s terminal.” We were waiting for other family members to arrive,

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so that we could join together in prayers for the dying. Her husband stood by her bedside and kept saying “My Dee. My Dee.” Translated: my pearl of great price. Jesus asks us today, “What do you make of this parable”?

This homily is not complete until you answer that question yourself. As for me, I find my pearl of great price to be that of having reasonably good health to continue my priestly ministry in an active way in spite of the burdens of old age.