

“Arranging Our Minds ~ Ahead of Time”

Preached by Carolyn Bohler  
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Matthew 13:44-45 “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

What has six legs and catches flies? Three outfielders. I’ll come back to this.

It is moving day for a 92-year-old man who is both relaxed and proud. After many hours of waiting patiently in the lobby of the nursing home, he smiles when told that his room is now ready. Legally blind, the man is careful as he maneuvers his walker to the doorway of his tiny new room. The nursing attendant begins a visual description, but doesn’t get very far. “I love it,” the man states with enthusiasm. “But you haven’t seen the room up close, just wait,” exclaims the attendant. “That doesn’t have anything to do with it,” the man replied. “Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. *Whether I like my room or not doesn’t depend on how the furniture is arranged—it depends upon how I arrange my mind.*”<sup>i</sup>

The 92-year-old man faced a life stage change. He arranged his mind in such a way that he declared, “I love it” when he arrived at the door of his new room. This man found a pearl of great value—he lived in the kingdom of heaven by deciding to love what was before him.

The job of the merchant in Jesus’ parable was to *search* for fine pearls. In the midst of this task, this *searching*, he found one pearl of exceptional value. It blew his mind! (Well the text doesn’t quite say that.) The scripture does convey that the merchant sold every single thing he had in order to return to buy that exceptional pearl.

Jesus tells this parable in the midst of describing what the kingdom of heaven is like. The *whole* parable describes what the kingdom of heaven is like.

The plowman--or whoever it was who was digging in a field--in Jesus’ companion parable found a treasure in the field that he was plowing. His *behavior* was similar to the merchant, but in this parable his *demeanor* is actually described. **He is joyous!** Filled with joy he sells all that he has to buy the whole field, in order to get that treasure he stumbled upon.

Jesus’ parables were not told to get us to go search for pearls or to dig for treasures. He told both tiny parables to describe something about what *the kingdom of heaven* is like. Notice, both men are living; these are not parables about after-life. The two men imagined by Jesus in his parables are living on earth in a heavenly-kind of way.

Jesus tells both these parables in the same context. In both cases, it’s the whole story that’s referred to as being like the kingdom of heaven. It’s not the *pearl* or the *treasure* that is likened to the kingdom of heaven. What the kingdom is LIKE is one who finds something *beyond his or her expectations and really goes for it...* What the kingdom is LIKE is one who searches and searches, tries lots of churches, tries study groups, tries solitude, and then in the midst of their searching finds their spiritual path in

ways that bring them *more joy* and enables them to share *more compassion* than they dreamed for as they were searching.

So, with Jesus' parables, whether we're just doing our daily routine and bump across something of enormous value or whether we're proactive, looking everywhere for a thing of value and then find it surpassing our expectations... the *process* of recognizing the value and *the movement of claiming the value and identifying with it and the joy or love of the whole process*--THAT is WHAT the KINGDOM of HEAVEN is like!

These two parables include the *searching* of the merchant and the *routine* of the plowman as well as the *discoveries*, the *selling* and the *having*. Actually, the parables don't dwell at all on *having* the pearl or treasure.

I've just realized how important it is to think of the whole parable. It's way too easy to read these parables and think, "What is our pearl today?" Is your pearl Redlands First Church? Is your pearl love that transcends a crisis? Is the pearl Jesus Christ? Is the pearl a friend? Is the pearl a book, a boat, a 3-D TV? I admit I've even preached on these passages with the intent of helping a congregation and myself to find our "pearls," our "treasures."

Yet now it sure seems that the point of the parables is not *what* the pearl is or what the treasure is, but that it *is heavenly to search or to go about our routines and to discover something that really matters to us, matters so much we are jubilant and we take action to stay connected with what we have discovered that really matters*. THAT's the Kingdom of Heaven...

This heavenly *way of being* in the midst of our searches or our routines makes me think of the main point of a book by Richard Niebuhr, who was a famous Christian ethicist. Actually this Christian Ethicist is remembered primarily for this one idea: *We should think of all of our actions as responses to actions upon us. And, we should try to consider acting as if we were responding to God.*<sup>ii</sup>

REPEAT.

Richard Niebuhr did **not** mean that God **does give us everything that happens to us**. But, that when we act, if we try to act *as if we were responding to God*, then our actions may be wiser, kinder, better—for all.

I don't know whether our sermons are of much practical use to you all. I hope so. I do confess that working on this sermon has had quite a practical impact on me. I've been preoccupied with trying out this ethical stance the last few days.

I finished a draft of this sermon on Friday, and then took off to go swimming at the Drayson Center in Loma Linda. I was swimming laps when, as usual, another swimmer asked to share the lane. Soon I realized that this other swimmer was quite a splasher. When we'd pass each other, I'd guard for big waves. Several thoughts began to enter my mind, and then I thought, "What if my reaction to this splasher were based on my imagining that he was God, or that God plunked him into my lane?" I laughed, as much as you can in water. I even sort of playfully enjoyed the turbulent water as I imagined God was doing the churning. As if that were not enough, when I was showering in the locker room, the water went from hot to cold, hot to cold, as usual. This time, I impishly thought, "What if I reacted to this surge of cold water as if God had given it to me?" Funny God, I thought.

I do not think that the other swimmer was God, nor that God plunked him in my lane necessarily, or that God negotiated the gym's hot water system. Yet, just my

THINKING, “How would I respond to these events IF it were God acting upon me?” truly made my day much more peaceful and playful.

Niebuhr’s ethical idea is not just for when we don’t like things, but also when we do. When we went to a play at U of R Friday evening, they served peanut butter cookies, and I really liked them. I found myself thanking God *as if* God baked them, made a comment aloud to John about the cookie and the man standing beside me said, “Thank you, I baked them.” Hmm. God incarnate.

The suggested ethical principal, *to respond to events as if it were God who is acting upon us*, was not really intended for responding to cold water and peanut butter cookies. I think the intent of this Christian ethicist was to use this **ethical principle to negotiate difficult boundaries like the Middle East or trade with Korea or G20 summits, or to have interfaith dialogue, maybe even to get along with all relatives at Thanksgiving time.**

I started preparing this sermon thinking that the two lead actors in Jesus’ parables and the 92 year old man who arranged his mind ahead of time to love his room were similar. The more I dwelled with these in my head, the more I realized that the 92 year old’s behavior is actually quite different from the merchant finding the pearl or the plowman finding the treasure. This man who arranged his mind ahead of time to love his room did not see the room *first*, and then sell whatever else he had to get the room. This man did not stumble upon the room during his routine and joyously get rid of everything else to move in. In fact he had never *seen* the room. It was not an external something that made him joyous. This gentle man *was experiencing the kingdom of heaven because of how he had arranged his mind*. The famous pearl procurer and treasure finder of Jesus’ parables represent people with zest, with go-for-it mentalities, with an openness to find and readiness to act. All that is heavenly, for with zest, go-for-itness, openness to see and readiness to act, one is not dominated by limiting stuff or harsh feelings.

This man with the arranged-ahead-of-time mind reminds me of the pearl seeker and treasure finder grown older, and wiser. The two in the parables were introduced to the heavenly life by a pearl and a treasure, but as elders they might no longer need an external enticement to gather their zestful responses. *Their pearl/treasure is truly within*. The *mind* of this 92 year old infused with God’s compassion and joy has become his pearl. I suppose when that happens, then it’s natural for him to respond to any event, including entering a new life stage and a tiny room, as if he were responding to the divine. What a gift. What a gift. He expects beauty.

**We might as well arrange our minds ahead of time to respond to events as if it were God acting.** Because then WE are very likely to love where we are and where we are going.

I have another question for you. What has about 1000 legs, yet manages to act as one body to reach out as olive branches with compassion to our world? (Congregations just like ours!)

Our final hymn speaks of love, joy, hope and faith being a gift from Jesus. Our singing is a **response** to this gift.

<sup>i</sup> E-mailed story entitled “Rules to be Happy.”

<sup>ii</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963, 56.