

FIND THE PEARL

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, May 20, 2018
based on Matthew 13:45–46; Acts 2:1–8; 12–17***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Fulfill Your Destiny.” This morning we are considering a parable which of all Jesus’ parables touches especially on the idea of finding one’s destiny. It is the parable we heard a moment ago, traditionally called the parable of the pearl of great price. Let us be in a moment of prayer. . .

In the first century, pearls were considered to be the most valuable of jewels. This is why at the end of the book of Revelation, the gates of heaven are pictured as being giant pearls. The very best pearls on earth in the days of Jesus came from the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. A pearl trader from Palestine would thus have to travel far to exotic lands to find the finest pearls

One such trader is the subject of Jesus’ parable. Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is like a merchant in search of fine pearls . . .” Jesus creates a picture of this merchant who is looking not just for ordinary stones; he is looking for the very best. He is searching for things of real value.

Right here the parable touches on a key aspect of fulfilling one’s destiny. You won’t fulfill much of a destiny if you are not looking for much. That unfortunately is how some people go through life. They are just looking for quick satisfaction in whatever comes easy. But in this parable Jesus challenges us to lift our vision considerably higher -- to be like this merchant who is looking for what is of true value.

The parable continues: “The kingdom of God is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who upon finding one pearl of great price . . .” The merchant finds *the* pearl. He finds a pearl which in the most traditional translation is described as being a “pearl of great price.” The original Greek in the parable actually means not simply that the pearl costs a lot but that it is a pearl of extraordinary value. This is the pearl of pearls, a pearl against which all other pearls fade.

Right here the parable implies another very important truth about destiny—namely, there is a destiny to be found. Many people today have the idea that life is essentially pointless, there is nothing of eternal value to be found or to be done, so the best you can do is to just try to entertain yourself as much as possible before you kick the can. Anyone with that kind of thinking will not be inclined to embark on a grand quest toward some sort of great destiny. But Jesus’ image of the merchant searching for and finding the pearl says that there is something out there of extraordinary value that is worth our seeking. Jesus lifts up the same idea elsewhere, such as when he teaches us to seek above all the Kingdom of God.

In parables like this one, Jesus is presenting a simple but gripping picture. Parables are not novels, so we don’t follow on with questions like, “So what does the merchant do

with the pearl if he buys it? Or, how does he have a jewelry shop with one pearl, that nobody can afford? Such questions are irrelevant, because the parable is designed to speak to us with one image—the picture of someone who is searching for what is of ultimate worth, and who finds it.

What then does the merchant do when he finds the pearl? “The kingdom of God,” Jesus said, “is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who upon finding a pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.” (Matthew 13:45-46)

Early in the gospel of Matthew, there is the story of fishermen casting their nets in the sea. They encounter Jesus; and they leave their boats and their fishing trade to follow him. A little later in the gospel there is the story of a tax collector named Matthew—the writer of the gospel—who was making a very good living being a tax collector. But when he encountered Jesus, he left his whole tax business to become a disciple. These disciples, when they met Jesus, knew they had found the pearl, and that it was worth sacrificing everything they had to follow him.

Notice at this point that there is a distinct difference between finding the pearl, and buying the pearl. You could find an extraordinary pearl and admire its beauty, and then just leave it on the shelf. Many people do something similar when they hear about Jesus. They see that there is something extraordinary about Jesus, and they admire his teachings. But that is as far as it goes.

But the image of buying the pearl is a picture of making a personal commitment. This is what the disciples do as they step forth to follow Jesus, and it is what we are each called to do today. But still further, the image in the parable is more than just making “a” commitment. The merchant sells everything to buy the pearl; he gives his all. So this finally is a picture of a wholehearted commitment of one’s entire self.

When the disciples first followed Jesus, they were not quite at this point. To be sure, Peter and Andrew and James and John had all left their fishing boats; but those boats were still back there. The disciples did not fully know what they were getting into, and they had the option, at any time, of bailing out and going back to their old vocation. Once, when a bunch of people were offended at Jesus’ challenging words and left, Jesus asked his disciples, “Are you wanting to go away now too?” (John 6:67) The disciples could have turned away. Judas eventually did. So at this point they were more like people who were examining the pearl and trying it on, or to use even more contemporary imagery, as they first followed Jesus it was more like a test drive. You can always decide not to close the deal.

But a distinctive moment arrived on the day of Pentecost, which we are celebrating today, and about which we heard in our Scripture reading from Acts. In the days prior, the disciples had encountered the Risen Christ, they had heard Jesus calling them now to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, they had heard Jesus promising that he would empower them with the Holy Spirit, and then on the day of Pentecost, fifty days

after Easter, they felt the Holy Spirit coming with power upon them. Now was the moment of real decision. The Spirit of Christ was calling them to commit the rest of their lives to spread the gospel throughout the world. What would they do?

The book of Acts reports that many people from all parts of the world had gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, a major spring harvest and religious festival, and it goes on to tell us, “Then Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and began to preach to the crowd.” (Acts 2:14) Pentecost is often called the birthday of the church, because on this day, all eleven disciples committed themselves to the mission of Christ. They began to share the good news of Jesus, and people began to respond in faith. Three thousand people, the book of Acts tells us, came to faith that day, and began to gather together in the community of faith called the church. The disciples would go forth as missionaries throughout the world. They devoted their lives to the work of God’s Kingdom. So they fulfilled the parable of Jesus about the merchant who, having found the pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

All this lifts up the basic question as to our destiny or purpose in life. We may not be called to the specific vocation of those disciples—to be missionaries spreading the gospel throughout the world—but the critical question for us is: To what are we devoting our lives?

This morning we are recognizing our graduating high school seniors. They are especially at a key moment in life, when they are thinking about what their calling is, and how they will direct their lives. But the fundamental question is continually before all of us: what is our ultimate calling or destiny in life?

Even if you never think about larger questions of destiny, the reality is that you are devoting your life to something. Students may be devoting themselves right now to preparing for a career. Some people are just devoting themselves to the everyday grind of getting along. Some people devote themselves toward getting rich, or making a name for themselves, or they may just be devoting themselves toward trying to have a good time at the moment. Over all this the key issue is: are you devoting your life toward what is of true worth?

The renowned early twentieth century Methodist preacher Clovis Chappell put it this way: “If you win the prize for which you are now spending your life, what will you have?”

Jesus encourages us to go for the pearl—to realize there is a marvelous destiny set before us in Christ, and to join ourselves then, above all, in being a part of the purposes of God. The story of Pentecost is the story of people doing exactly that—they came to faith in Christ, they connected together in the church, they opened themselves to the power of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit enabled them to use their various gifts to share finally in the work of God’s Kingdom. We can continue that story today—and so become like the merchant who set his sights on the highest prize. As the apostle Paul said, “I press on

toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Jesus Christ.”
(Philippians 3:14)