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SERMON "ON PEARLS AND TREASURES"

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On Pearls and Treasures

Matthew 13:44-46

For the past nine weeks, we have been taking a close look at some of the parables of Jesus, especially those that address the kingdom or realm of God. Since we can't touch, smell or feel it, Jesus tries to explain what God's kingdom or realm looks like using everyday examples. These parables describe, not another place where we will go after we die. No. They describe what the world would be like if we were to follow God's ideas of justice, peace and love. In other words, Jesus describes God's kingdom as something we can experience here and now.

According to Jesus, God's realm is all around us. When we witness someone's generosity, we are witnessing God's realm at work. When people who normally don't like each other and don't get along, rally together to help others who are in need, we catch a glimpse of what God's kingdom is like. When people from different walks of life ride in a car together, we see what the world could be if we were to follow God's ideal for the world.

A lot of things get to me when I drive, but one of the things that really "irks" me the most is when drivers, consciously ignore traffic laws. Daily, I see people getting off Fuerte Drive to catch I-8. There is a carpool lane and a regular lane there. In the mornings, there is also a traffic flow control light. Regularly, I see cars with only one person onboard driving on the carpool lane and then run the red light. Most of the time, there are no cops in the area, so who cares? Well, I care!

What does this have anything to do with God's realm? Well, when we do the right thing even when we can get away with doing the wrong thing, or even when it doesn't matter, in my opinion, we have understood what the kingdom of God is all about. For me, what matters the most is doing the right thing, not when someone is watching, but all the time, but most importantly, doing the right thing, even when nobody is watching.

Today, we are presented with two very familiar parables about the kingdom. I would like to take them in the reverse order than they are presented in our Scripture reading. The Parable of the Pearl compares the realm of heaven with a

merchant who finds a very valuable pearl and sells everything he has in order to buy it. As I have said before, the challenge with many of Jesus' parables is that, often, we can't understand the impact of what Jesus is saying because the images he uses are not our images. The image of a merchant looking for a pearl doesn't say much to me. I really don't care much about pearls neither does Sherry, so pearls are irrelevant to us. I suspect the same holds true for some of you.

So, let's see if we can make this parable a bit more contemporary. Merchants in Jesus' time were not the top wealthiest people; they were not part of the elite, although they lived very well. More importantly, they controlled the economy. So, who would be the merchants today?

What about investment bankers? So, let's say the merchants are investment bankers. What about the pearl? That would be stocks. So, let's read the parable using modern images: "The kingdom of heaven is like an investment banker in search of a unique stock; on finding one stock of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." Now, what's wrong with that picture? Well, good financial sense dictates that you don't put all your eggs in one basket! Second, stocks are valuable only if someone else wants to buy them. If there isn't anyone interested in purchasing the stock, that stock is worthless.

So, you are crazy, if you sell everything you own to buy this one stock. But Jesus says that the kingdom of God is just like that. The realm of heaven is like a pearl that is everything and nothing at the same time. In other words, the kingdom of God will cost you everything you have and it is worth it, whether someone else agrees with you or not. Moreover, living for the kingdom will not make you a good merchant or a successful business banker, because you are not playing by the rules of economics.

Let's put the Parable of the Pearl aside for a moment and let's look at the Parable of the Great Treasure. Here, Jesus compares the realm of heaven with "a treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all he has and buys that field." For us, twenty-first century Christians, treasures are real only in pirate movies. So, once again, we need to use modern images in order to understand what Jesus is really trying to say. In Jesus' time, the field was not a field in the modern sense of the word, but a small plot of land, much like the

front yard of our homes. And what would be the equivalent of a treasure in our time? [Lottery ticket]

So, let's read the parable with modern eyes: "The kingdom of heaven is like a lotto ticket hidden in someone's front yard, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys the property. Now, what's wrong with that image? In the first place, you don't own the property, but you know there is a lottery ticket hidden there. I mean, if you are a person of ethics, you would let the owner of the house know that he has this ticket hidden in his yard, wouldn't you agree? So, selling everything to buy this property without letting the owner know makes you a pretty sleazy character. On the other hand, you could've waited until it was dark and take the lottery ticket and you didn't have to even buy the property. Of course, that would've made you a thief.

I believe the point Jesus is trying to make is that we cannot earn nor steal God's kingdom. In other words, we cannot earn nor steal God's love. And that even if you try to connive or steal your way into the kingdom, God still welcomes you, because there is nothing you can do to earn or lose God's love for you. We are welcomed into God's kingdom, not because we are wise merchants or unethical individuals; we are welcomed into God's kingdom because of God's all-encompassing grace and love. No matter where we are in life, not matter who we are in life, God's treasure, God's kingdom is ours. The kingdom of God is for you. Just open your heart and you will discover that you are already part of God's magnificent realm.