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**Athelstone Uniting Church #190**

**26 3 2023**

**Texts:** Matt 4:18-22 and **Matt 13:45-46** (NIV)

*Theme: **Becoming Someone New***

*from the 'Where your heart is' series*

*(based on a resource from Illustrated Ministry)*

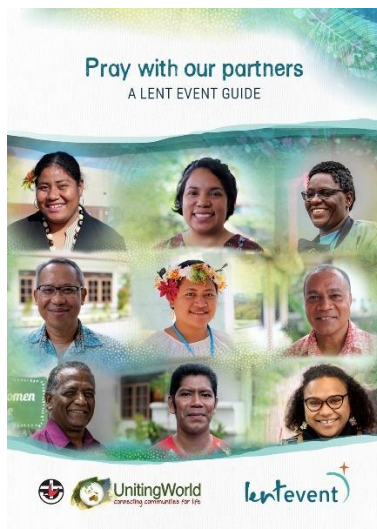


Niina marni!

We are in the fifth week of Lent! Next week is Palm Sunday, Messy Easter, and then the week following is Holy Week! How did that come so quickly!?

Lent is a season of reflection on our spiritual journey – a time to reflect on our spiritual practices and what is helpful to take up or to put down.

To help in your discipleship journey during Lent, I have gathered several resources for you to make use of which have been available at the table by the door and emailed out. I hope these resources have been helpful.



One of these resources is the LentEvent prayer guide. I have been typing up the daily prayers and sharing them as facebook posts on our church facebook page. It is humbling and confronting to read the words of people from our partner churches in the Pacific, Asia and Africa. They are facing such enormous challenges, yet still hold hope that God will answer their prayers – for those who face violence, or racial discrimination, for those affected by climate change and natural disasters, for young people and for leaders.

I commend this prayer guide to you, and encourage you to pray about how you will support LentEvent financially this year. There are brochures on the table with giving information. Or go online to [lentevent.com.au](http://lentevent.com.au)



Our theme for Lent is "Where your heart is". By exploring Gospel passages about those things that we hold dear to our heart, we are wondering more deeply about what kinds of treasure matter, why we store treasures, and the power these treasures have in our lives. Much of the inspiration comes from resources from Illustrated Ministry dot com.



Today's main reading, the very short one, speaks of a treasure in the form of a pearl.

" 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."

In this parable, Jesus tells the story of a merchant who was looking for fine pearls, who ends up finding one beautiful, valuable pearl, and sells everything he has to buy it. Now he has nothing except for one big, beautiful pearl. He isn't even a merchant anymore! He has become the guy with the big pearl. Now what?

What does this teach us about the kingdom of heaven?

And what's a pearl worth? Are they really that precious?

Pearls were greatly valued in the first century Mediterranean world. . Perhaps even as valuable as diamonds and gold. It was often a symbol of the highest good.

What's a pearl worth? ...Everything?

The character in the parable didn't set out in search of a pearl of great value. He began his quest searching for lots of pearls.

But he found this one -just ONE and gave everything he had for it

Before we say, "Well, sure, he found the kingdom of God! Who wouldn't give everything for that? You gain everything in return!" ..We need to make sure we're reading closely what Jesus actually said, not what we think might've made sense for him to say.

The kingdom of heaven isn't like a pearl, even a pearl of great value.

The kingdom of heaven is like a *merchant* who went in search of fine pearls...

And when he finds his treasure -an exceptionally fine pearl - which, again, is not what he set out after - he sold everything to gain it.

This loss is not a temporary change in status. It is a fundamental shift of being.

Amy-Jill Levine writes, "Whether what he does is foolhardy or dedicated, he has gained a pearl of enormous value. In the gaining, he has not only fulfilled a desire he did not know he had; he has also changed his identity. He had been looking for fine pearls, but he buys only one. By finding that pearl of ultimate worth, the merchant stops being a merchant. Thus he redefines himself. and we must see him anew as well."<sup>1</sup>

When you sell everything you have, you can't do any more selling. And what do you become - just you, with your one, exquisite, forged-by-the-sea jewel? What is your life now, having rid yourself of all else? We know the person who was seeking fine pearls is no longer a merchant. We don't yet know who they are on the other side of that.

Now this is a parable – and parables aren't to be taken at face value.. a parable is a short, simple story that teaches or explain an idea, especially a spiritual lesson.

So, what was Jesus teaching the disciples?

**what is the kingdom of God like?**

**Was it about finding that thing of value, that thing you're passionate about and following it?**

When we get really, really excited about something, we will often drop what we are doing in order to focus on it. We will even make sacrifices just so we can be a part of wonderful, good things.

Remember how Jesus called his disciples? Many of the disciples were fishermen, but when Jesus called them, they dropped their nets and began a new life. They did more than drop their nets... they walked away from a way of life that had been handed down to them from generation to generation. They walked away from their part in the fishing industry, leaving others to pick up their responsibilities, so that their families had enough food to eat, and the Romans had enough goods to charge taxes on!

This still happens today! Walking away from a way of life that has been planned out, from parents' dreams, from hard work, reputation...

There are many stories of people becoming passionate and putting their life on hold to speaking up for causes: human rights, racism, apartheid, violence against women, climate change, a Voice for First Peoples,

Many of our partners through LentEvent... Passionate people who have let go of their personal plans and headed out to be a part of something bigger.

These moments, where we fundamentally shift who we are, don't come along often. But they are worth paying attention to. Some people experience a dramatic walking away, like the disciples did that day, while others make a series of decisions that take them down paths that were never dreamed of earlier.

Who would have thought that a quiet book-reading, nerdy flute player would end up decades later as the Minister of Athelstone Uniting Church? my journey involved lots of decision points, where I needed to decide what that pearl was for me, and let go of any other dreams I had. That certainly was the case when I left Novita. I had found a job that paid well, and brought in some sense of security for our family, at a time when we had two boys at Pedare. But I had found the pearl that God was offering me. The pearl was a call to serve the church. and I knew I had to let go of the security of that job to be able to follow God's call. I worked for a few years at uniting college on a considerably lower wage, and every time those school fees were due we had to trust in God's provision. But we got through. With much love and support and encouragement from Paul, I remained focussed on following this call to ministry and God was faithful.

Sometimes, the kingdom of God feels like a kind of adventure. We don't know exactly what we are getting ourselves into, but we know the mysterious adventure is worth trading in our treasures.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2015), 152. Quoted in the Illustrated Ministry devotional

The disciples (and I!) and those who have made a stand in recent times did not know how their stories would end. They may have been afraid to try something new, but they took the risk.

Are these the marks of the kingdom? Mystery, Risk, Change?

To value this pearl so highly, it must have been extraordinary. A thing of great beauty. Something so captivating that the merchant would give up his career selling pearls, in order to have it and enjoy it.

So is that another mark of the kingdom? Beauty, wonder, awe, joy?

## **what is the kingdom of God like?**

### **Was Jesus teaching about discipleship and transformation?**

On our quest for meaning and purpose, many of us have Discovered the wonder and the mystery and the awe of faith in Christ. We discover that we are Beloved people of God. When this happens, we go through our own personal transformation. Through the grace of God we begin the journey of Becoming someone new.

So, is the pearl of great value, life in the Spirit, as our mind and spirit is transformed to become more like Christ?

In this new life, we go through a letting go of old ways, a turning around, or repentance.

"we learn to follow in simple acts. Slowly but surely our priorities change.

On the day they first followed Jesus, the disciples would have been brash, impulsive and stubborn. They smelled of fish and were not always kind. Day by day they had to learn new ways of being."<sup>2</sup>

In this new life, we take on a new identity in Christ. We Become the unique special person we were made to be.

These new ways of being show in the way we interAct with the world: the way we bless others, the way we show Acts of kindness, the choices we make in what we buy, how we engage in the political process, how we treat our children, our neighbours, strangers, how we honour creation.

In this case, what do we leave behind? Do we leave everything behind like the merchant? I don't think so... Much of who we have been carries over into our new lives. We let go of those things that separate us from the love of God or put us at odds with the community around us.

Those things that make us uniquely and wonderfully made.. I believe these things continue and are nurtured and amplified.

## **what is the kingdom of God like?**

### **Was Jesus teaching about the cost of discipleship?**

Following Jesus can mean leaving much behind. It can mean letting go of things that were once held dear. It also means investing everything we have in following Jesus. It can be costly.

What about for you? Can you think of something you'd give up everything for to pursue? What do you long for?

Perhaps.. it is to see family squabbles end, racial divisions cease, hungry people fed, an end to violence, a voice for the voiceless, healing for the sick, war ended... what would you give up to see change, justice, peace?

When we are caught up in the longing for an end to suffering, injustice and destruction, we find ourselves participating in God's kingdom. A pearl of great value.

It's a short parable, but there is much to learn from it!

- Finding that thing of value, that thing you're passionate about and following it

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<sup>2</sup> Brett Younger in Feasting on the Gospels. P67

- The process of discipleship and transformation
- The cost of discipleship

And... could we say that Jesus was talking about himself as that greatest treasure, worth selling everything to follow?

To close, I'll quote Nancy Hastings Sehested, who said:

"The pearl of great price shimmers through Jesus and his redemptive story.

Jesus, who was born on the outside to outsiders.

Jesus, who lived by grace for all those left behind from Love's embrace.

Jesus, who challenged the powers in place and placed himself among the powerless.

Jesus, who chose to live by the Spirit that was within him, a holy Presence that would not forsake him.

Jesus, who was killed by the powers of this world and resurrected by the Power of all the world.

It is this Jesus who joyfully invites us to give our all to discover the treasures awaiting us in the [Kingdom of God].<sup>3</sup>

Amen

## Sources:

*Where your heart is Lenten Devotional*

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*Reflections on the heart. An illustrated lent for families.*

*Illustrated Ministry* [illustratedministry.com](http://illustratedministry.com)

*Feasting on the Gospels. Matthew, Volume 1.*

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy Hastings Sehested in Feasting on the Gospels (p397)