



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 8 Proper 12 (A)

Perseverance and the Pearl

**[RCL]: Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b or Psalm 128; Romans 8:26-39;
Matthew 13:31-33,44-52**

The *I Ching*, the Book of Changes, is an ancient book of Chinese wisdom dating back to the time before Confucius. You toss coins or yarrow stalks and, depending on how they fall, you create a hexagram: a stack of six solid or broken lines that correspond to a similar picture in the book. You then consult that hexagram for advice. One bit of advice includes the phrase, “Perseverance Furthers.”

That is certainly the story of Jacob in his quest for a wife. He has stolen his older brother Esau’s birthright by tricking his father, Isaac. Jacob’s mother suggests he run away to lay low with a kinsman, Uncle Laban, and while there find himself a wife. Jacob falls in love with Laban’s younger daughter, Rachel. He offers to work for Laban for seven years so he can marry her. Laban agrees. Jacob works for seven years, which the narrative says, “seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.”

He goes to claim his wife. Laban makes all the wedding arrangements, when, lo and behold, the trickster Jacob is tricked! Laban gives away his firstborn daughter Leah, she of the lovely eyes, to Jacob, which Jacob does not discover until the next morning. After confronting Laban, he is told that he has already consummated the marriage, and besides, local custom does not allow giving away the younger daughter before the firstborn. Complete this week of wedding celebrations, however, and work another seven years for me, then you may marry Rachel as well! Jacob agrees and seven years later marries Rachel whom he loves. Perseverance furthers.

And that’s not all – over time, he also marries Leah’s servant Zilpah, and Rachel’s servant Bilhah, and as we all know, among these four wives he fathers twelve sons who become the heads of the tribes of Israel – Jacob’s new name, given to him by the stranger with whom he wrestles all night beside the river Jabbok (Israel means “he who wrestles with God”). Despite what this foundational story might tell us about the Biblical view of marriage, one can easily say that Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of father Abraham, persevered in his quest for the woman he loved, persevered in wrestling with God, and as such became the father of the tribes of Israel. Jacob persevered for the pearl of great value Jesus talks about in Matthew.

“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.” Years ago, long before Tom Shaw, S.S.J.E., became the bishop of Massachusetts, he gave a meditation to the clergy of the Diocese of Connecticut during a Holy Week quiet day. He spoke about this parable of the Pearl of Great Value. He began by saying that our God is a very frugal God and does not waste one iota of our life experience. Each moment we live and breathe on this earth, God values and savors who we are and what we are doing.

One of the hidden truths of the kingdom is that we, each of us, and all of us together as God’s people, are the pearl of great value. That is how much our God loves each and every one of us – so much so that God would send his only son to walk among us and as one of us to show us the way of the Lord. So much so that he did not let us get away with killing his only son, but returned him to us, so that wherever two or three are gathered in his name, Jesus himself is in the midst of us, calling us to return to the God from whence we came. We come from love. We return to love. And love is all around. God is love and loves us even more than the merchant who gave everything for the pearl of great value.

This is all meant to be an example of God’s perseverance in loving us. Even God’s wrath is an extension of God’s love for us; as Maggie Ross writes in *The Fire of Your Life*, “The wrath of God is his relentless compassion, pursuing us even when we are at our worst.”

Recognizing that we are precious in the eyes of our God, said Shaw, we need to take time each day in our prayers to be silent and allow God to thank us for what we have done for God today. Every day we are to leave some silence in our prayers and to allow ourselves to feel God thanking us for all that we do for God in this, his world. It sounds so easy. But are we really capable of believing and knowing that God loves us that much? Do we feel like pearls of great value? Shaw assured us that we can – and, more importantly, that we must. It is central to the life of faith to accept and receive God’s love – to know how much God values us and what we do.

This is why all of these kingdom parables are so very important to understand. They each point to the hiddenness of God’s reign in our midst. They each suggest that the life of faith begins with something as small as a little bit of yeast or a single grain of mustard seed. We do not need to do what the world perceives as big and heroic things. As God’s own pearls of great value, every little thing we do for others brings a smile to the face of God.

The more we let God thank us for what we can do for God, the more confident and empowered we become as God’s own people. Soon, the people around us and the people we meet begin to feel like pearls of great value as well. All we really need is faith as small as a mustard seed to make the whole creation new! To give new life to our own tired bodies. To put a smile on the face of a stranger. To plant seeds of God’s love throughout the neighborhood in which God has called us to make our home.

Take time today to be silent and to let God thank you for what you have done for God today. Don’t worry about tomorrow. Just feel God’s thanks and love for today. Imagine God washing your feet at the end of a

long day. Imagine God offering you a piece of his bread and a sip of his wine. Imagine God making you an integral part of his body, that sacred mystery, the Church. Beginning today, make time every day for God to thank for what you are doing for God. Persevere in accepting that you are God's pearl of great value.

As we luxuriate in God's thanks, mercy, compassion, and love, we will become a new people. We will come to accept that we are God's pearls of great value. As that new understanding takes root and grows within us, others will come and make their home among us, take rest among our branches, and discover their value as God's own pearls as well. Such a life of love and thanksgiving is all ours if only we will have faith as small as a mustard seed. Amen.

The Rev. Kirk Alan Kubicek is currently Priest in Charge at Christ Church, Rock Spring Parish, Forest Hill, Md. Christ Church is a Small but Mighty parish, and together we are rediscovering what our Lord has in store for our future. He has spent over 35 years in Parish Ministry in all shapes and size parishes, and for 15 years worked with The Episcopal Church Office of Stewardship and TENS. He often uses storytelling, music, and guitar in proclaiming the Good News. Married with three adult children and one grandson, Kirk also plays drums in On The Bus, a DC Metro Area Grateful Dead tribute band. Kirk leads noonday prayers and more, Monday through Friday at noon Eastern on the Christ Church Forest Hill Facebook page and at christchurchforesthill.org. He leads Sunday worship on the same two platforms at 9:45 am Eastern. All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of thing shall be well!