

Matthew 13:44-46

When our daughter was little, she had a children's Bible Story book. The story of the Hidden Treasure and Pearl of Great Price was her favorite. She wanted her mother to read it quite often. The problem was that her mother always groaned inwardly whenever she was asked to read it. Not because she didn't like the story, but because she had to ad lib the story. The way the book told the story, the treasure and the pearl refer to Jesus, the man and the merchant in the parables refer to the person who seeks and finds Jesus and gives up everything else in life in order to have Jesus. But that's not how the story should be told.

And so our daughter, as she listened to her mother, heard her not reading the story as it was printed in the book, but she heard her mother telling the story in the manner in which it should be told. *"You, Sarah, are the hidden treasure. And you, Sarah, are the pearl of great price. And your Heavenly Father sought you and He found you, and from joy over you, He gave up all that He had; He gave up His Son, Jesus to die for you so that He would have you for Himself."* And every time she heard the story, our daughter's eyes would light up and she would beam with a smile that went from ear to ear.

Wouldn't you? For you to know and believe that you are a treasure in the eyes of your Heavenly Father, that He has joy over you, that He sacrificed to have you for Himself, giving up His Son for you, wouldn't that affect you in a positive way?

So of course, the devil has buried this wonderful Christ-centered way of telling the story, just as the treasure in the parable was buried and hidden in the ground. This is why children's Bible Story books tell the story very differently. This is why these parables are usually preached from pulpits with the wonderful Gospel-rich meaning completely buried. For if Jesus is the treasure and the pearl, then you are the one who has to take action. You have to seek and find Him. You have to give up everything in order to purchase and have Him. The burden is on you. You are the actor in the story. Your salvation depends upon what you do.

Satan is delighted when these parables, and all the Scriptures, are preached in this way. Of course he hates for God's Word to be preached at all. But if it is to be proclaimed and heard, the devil is at least gratified when the true meaning of the story is buried in the ground and everything is put into your hands.

But that's where we like it as well...in our hands. We like to take charge of our own salvation--of our coming to Christ, our staying in the faith, and our final entrance through the pearly gates. Our flesh, sinful as it is, does not want God to be the actor in the story. It wants to be the central character. It offends us to hear that we don't have what it takes to make it on our own through life. Our ego is deflated with all this Bible-talk that our salvation depends upon God from start to finish.

You see, by nature we do not see ourselves as the treasure and pearl because we do not like where they come from. The treasure was buried in the dirt. The pearl came from an oyster living in the muck and slime at the bottom of the ocean. That's not us. We may not come from royalty, but we

are quite proud of our heritage. We received good genes from our ancestors. If you're looking for dirt, muck, and slime, then go over the river to certain places in East St. Louis.

But friend, if you did not come from filth, if you were not born utterly in sin, if you are not that treasure that came from the dust of the ground and that pearl pulled up from the depths, then God has not found you, has no joy over you, and you do not belong to Him. That's why it is of the utmost importance that we hear these parables of Jesus, and all Scripture, in the proper way. Our salvation depends on it.

You and I were nothing to look at. We were covered in filth. But God sought you and He found you, and from joy over you, He gave up the very best that He had. He sent His Son to the cross. He sent Jesus to be covered with all the muck and filth of our sin and to die. And now you belong to Him, for He has washed you of your filth in the waters of baptism.

To believe this is the work of God in your heart. To grasp this and stake our eternal salvation on it is nothing less than a miracle. For every fiber of our being wants to make Jesus the treasure and put ourselves as the hero that finds Him. But that's not how it happened.

Maybe we do not see ourselves as treasures much; maybe others do not exactly treat you like a precious pearl. And it's true that we usually do not act like treasures and pearls. We act more like we're covered with dirt and slime. But friend, that is not how God sees you. There is nothing He treasures more than you. He was even willing to give up His beloved Son to the cross to make you His own. We're not treasures and pearls to God because of what we do for Him. Even before you and I were born, He gave His Son to die for us.

So this is how your God sees you...all of you, as treasures and pearls. Is that how we see each other? If it is, then is that how we treat each other? I think it's hard for us to get past the dirt. God sees past it because He forgives. He washed you clean in your baptism. He claimed you there. He forgives you. And He will never unforgive you. I don't even think that's a word. It's not in God's vocabulary. You are forgiven--dirt, muck, slime and all. Everyone of you is forgiven by God for Jesus' sake.

We still sin. We sin against God. We sin against each other. When you shake my hand later, you will be shaking the hand of a treasure in the eyes of God, but one that is still a sinner. So there is dirt on my hand when you shake it--the dirt of sin. And there's dirt on your hand. Sometimes all we see is the dirt. Sometimes we'd rather not shake the hands of others or interact with others because of the dirt. We don't always see the treasure beneath the dirt, and so sometimes we exchange angry words. Sometimes we do less than forgive. We unforgive. This happens in our marriages and families. It happens here. But not with God. You have no dirt in His eyes. You are only a treasure and a pearl.

Let's remember that we belong to Him. He found us and He bought us. And Jesus who died for us, now lives in us. We can forgive because He does. We can look past the dirt because He does. We can treat each other as treasures and pearls because that's what we are to God, and so we are also to each other. Amen.