

THE WISDOM OF GOD

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Luke 12:13-21 - The rich fool

Matthew 13:44-53 - The treasure, the pearl and the fish

I chose these two scripture readings today which contrast two sides of life between which we live so much of our spiritual lives--our Christian lives of faith. One side is represented by the story of the rich fool who is on a dead-end path in life. It's the path of the fool who has some picture and some great motivational endeavour to get rich. This person has a picture of achieving wealth which would permit him or her just to lie back and relax and enjoy a life that would somehow become fulfilling. That's an enticing kind of story that every one of us falls for at some point in life. Maybe it's not getting rich; maybe it's some sort of fame, or maybe it's some other kind of achievement, such that that once we get there we'll know we're okay and will be able to relax and be whatever we think we'll be. The other side is this parable of the pearl and the treasure and the fish. These are all hidden things, each in the depth and the centre of something--the fish underneath the water, the treasure buried somewhere in a field, and the pearl inside the oyster. When we discover them, everything else in our lives becomes secondary and we realize that this is the true pearl of wisdom, the true treasure, the true catch of life.

Those two poles reflect a universal story--and we have all heard many versions of that story--of somebody who has a great endeavour, direction in life, achievement, whatever it is, and who is reasonably successful because his or her life is about "success" in that area. Someone once said the two most terrible outcomes for a person in the great endeavours of life are success and failure! We know the people who have failed; they have a sense of worthlessness, and it breaks them. We know those who have succeeded but have hit a place of emptiness in life or the loneliness of being at the top. And we've all heard stories of people who have been on a similar track and have suddenly come to a moment where something has broken in, broken down, broken out. Something has broken that shell, that spell, that rut. These people have caught a vision of something very different--some pearl, some treasure, some centre of life--that has suddenly made all that endeavour seem worthless. As a result, they have turned to a new direction in life that has surprised the people who have known them, but which has taken them to a deeper place, a fulfillment in life. Maybe that direction involved no great achievement; maybe it was nothing about which anyone might say "hey, look, isn't he great, good or wealthy." It might have meant living in poverty relative to how they had lived before. And yet we could see that there's a sense in which these people now have the true pearl. And what makes that difference in life for us? Where is that great pearl, where do we

look to find that treasure? How do we know on which side of the boat to let the nets down, to have that great catch of fish? Where do we find that?

One of the books that has really shaped my thinking from long ago is written by a Jungian psychologist named John Sandford and entitled *The Kingdom Within*. Sandford takes all of Jesus' parables and other teachings and claims that one way of interpreting them is as symbols or metaphors of the inner life. So what Sandford says--and he's not arguing against other interpretations--is that we can hear everything Jesus says about the kingdom of God as referring to the inner life of our souls, of our hearts. There's one place in Jesus' teachings recorded in the Book of Luke where the Pharisees are in conversation with him and Jesus has been talking about the Kingdom of God. He uses the parables about how the seed is planted and grows mysteriously, and the parables of the pearl and the treasure, and the Pharisees ask him when this kingdom is going to come and how they will recognize it. Jesus says it will not be anything observable. The Kingdom is within them.

There's an interesting little translation note on that verse. In the old Authorized Version known as the King James Version, the kingdom is translated as being "within" you. In the Revised Standard Version the translation is different, and as is characteristic of many places where the translation differs, it is interpreted more socially. According to that Version, the kingdom is "among" you. It's a tiny Greek word that could go either way, but what a huge difference in meaning! We have interpreted the kingdom as "among" you, meaning more of a social thing, more of a political thing, building the kingdom of God, being about justice and so on. Sandford is not saying that is wrong. It's an interpretation that has been very important in the history of our culture. But there is another whole side to it, and who knows just exactly which one Jesus had in mind? Sandford argues convincingly that Jesus could have been talking a lot more about inner life than about the sense of the kingdom being among us socially. Accordingly, Jesus could have been turning people's attention to their inner selves; accordingly, this pearl becomes a metaphor of what we can find already buried within us at the heart of our own being. So the spiritual idea, the spiritual truth that is here, becomes the notion that the wisdom of God is within us.

Earlier in my life I was much more interested in all the books that tell about the twelve steps to a happier life, or something like that. There's always a prescription of a nice ladder to climb, steps to perform, and the many things to do in order to make one's way somewhere. I find myself less and less enamoured with those little instructional systems, and am more and more caught, I think, by the power of the simple idea that the wisdom of God is at the centre of our being. If we hold that idea in our minds, if we believe that--and maybe that's a very important part of what faith means--then the orientation in our lives where we look for direction is shifted. Every one of us wants to succeed in some way. We want to know how to live, what we need to do, in order to reach the end of our lives and be able to say "Yes, it went well; I figured out what I was here for and I did it." I mean just to be able to say that life turned out okay, because for many it doesn't turn out that way.

For many people, coming to the end of life and having maybe achieved a lot of wealth or greatness, means also coming to a heartbreaking emptiness. As someone once

said, nobody on their death bed ever wished they had spent more time at the office. But many people on their death beds wish they had spent less time at the office, because suddenly life comes into perspective and it looks really different. When we discover the pearl, the treasure, that great catch of fish that comes out of the ocean of the unconscious at the centre of our being, then what we have in our hands, what we have in our grasp, is truly the wisdom of God which shows us the way our lives are to go. It shows us a movement, a flow of the spirit, that is there already and with which we need only to align, to move, to flow, or which we need to follow, in order to be “successful.” But not successful in the sense of achievement or even in the sense of recognition, because when we are out of touch with that spiritual truth we tend to live externally and for what the world tells us is “success.” We live for the applause and the approval of others; we live like a chameleon who can be whatever anyone wants it to be, who does whatever it takes to seek the approval or the acknowledgement whether it’s applause, fame, wealth, or whatever. But we live without a true self; we live as the hollow ones.

And that’s the essential difference between being out of touch with the truth and being in touch with it. When we are in touch with the truth we look deep within our own souls to see what God has planted there, what pearls have formed there. When we touch those pearls of wisdom at the heart of our souls we just know instinctively, like that person who went and sold everything and bought the field because he knew that’s where the treasure was, because that knowing, that knowledge, that perception, that recognition, is planted within us. We need only to touch that place within us in order to touch the wisdom of God and to truly know what our lives are for, to truly know what path to follow, what way to go that will truly give us a sense that we know ourselves, we know God’s presence in our lives, we what our lives are for, and we know we are on the path. It doesn’t matter if any fame or wealth is associated with it. It’s that we then know, and we are then able to flow with that and find the greatest depth of fulfillment and joy that life can give us. So in Sandford’s sense of the kingdom, the kingdom within, we need only to seek first that kingdom within and then everything else follows and life blossoms to its fullness.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor