

July 27, 2008 – 11th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12) – Year A – RCL (track one)
The Church of the Holy Trinity, Rittenhouse Square – The Rev. Diana Carroll

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 the name of God, the holy and undivided Trinity. Amen.

You may have read in the news a few weeks ago about a man who sold his entire life on EBay. Apparently, he had just gone through a difficult divorce, and in order to make a fresh start, he auctioned off everything he owned, along with introductions to his friends and a two-week trial at his old job. The bidding didn't go quite as high as he had hoped. But he still plans to take his profits and travel for a while and, presumably, see what's next.

Selling off your whole life probably sounds to most of us like a pretty crazy thing to do. It's outrageous, even shocking. Which of course, is why it made international headlines. But something very similar to that EBay auction takes place in two of the five parables in this morning's gospel reading.

What *all* of these parables have in common is that they describe some aspect of what Jesus calls "the kingdom of heaven." The parables are arranged in pairs. First, the mustard seed and the yeast, which are images of growth and abundance. Then, the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great value, which both center around an object that is almost priceless. And finally, there is the parable of the net thrown into the sea, which forms a parallel to the story of the wheat and the weeds that we heard in last week's gospel.

It's those middle two stories that sound reminiscent of the man auctioning his life on EBay. In both stories, someone goes, and sells all that they have, and they buy that field or that pearl, which is precious to them beyond all else.

At the moment, I have some idea what it might look like to sell "all that I have." As most of you know, I recently moved to Philadelphia from Connecticut in order to begin working here at Holy Trinity as Assistant to the Rector. There is nothing quite like moving to make you take stock of all that you have." The past few months have made me keenly aware of what I own and what I do not own. So it's not that hard to come up with a list of what would go into an auction of my possessions: Car, laptop, books, art, the nice new clothes I've just bought to fill out my "professional wardrobe," furniture, jewelry. You can probably come up with a similar list of your own. But if you're anything like me, it's a lot harder to come up with a *reason* why you would ever *want* to sell everything you own. Very few of us would contemplate taking such a drastic step. What could possibly be worth that much?

The great thing about parables is that they never have just one meaning. As Robert Capon writes in his book *Parables of Grace*, "Had [Jesus] wanted to give us glittering generalities, he could no doubt have unburdened himself of them in plain Aramaic and avoided the bother of having to make up artful stories." What makes stories different from "plain Aramaic" (or plain English, for that matter) is that they can be interpreted in different ways. Parables are powerful precisely

because they contain many layers of meaning, and the most obvious layer is not always the most significant.

Of course, for many parables, there is a standard interpretation that has come to dominate over the centuries. Sometimes, those interpretations become so engrained that we can hardly see the parables as stories anymore and instead only see what we have always been told is “the meaning” or “the main point.” I know that’s certainly true for me and these parables about treasure and pearls. The interpretation seems obvious, doesn’t it? The treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great value both symbolize the kingdom of heaven itself, and *we* are the people being called on to sacrifice everything we have, everything we are, for the sake of that kingdom.

There is nothing wrong with this interpretation. In fact, it is a very important statement about the Christian life. We *are* called to make sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom of God. We are called to give up those things—whether physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological, or material—that get in the way of our walk with God and that keep us from being in right relationship with one another. And we are also called to give our time, energy, and yes, our money, in a very concrete and sacrificial way, in order to do the work of the kingdom of God.

All of this is very right and true. But it is not the only way that the parables of the treasure and the pearl may be understood. Last year, while I was in seminary, a friend of mine preached on this text. When she came to the parable of the pearl, she pointed out that it doesn’t actually say, “the kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great value.” It says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a *merchant* in search of fine pearls.” To her, the kingdom was not the prize for which we must search and sacrifice. No. The kingdom of heaven is the merchant, and it is searching for *us*.

In this interpretation, *we* are the pearl of great value. *We* are the treasure hidden in a field. And *God* is the one who seeks us out and finds us—wherever we may be hiding—and gives up everything, *everything*, to make us God’s own. As Paul reminds us in the letter to the Romans, God did not withhold even God’s own Son, but gave him up for all of us. We are worth that much to God. We are that valuable, that priceless in God’s sight.

In the Old Testament lesson we read that Jacob was willing to work seven years, and then again another seven, for the sake of the one he loved. How much more is God willing and able to do on our behalf, we who are God’s beloved.

That is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

And that is why Paul can say with such confidence “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

How can we even begin to respond to that extravagant love that God offers to us in Jesus Christ? We respond by letting that love be like a seed, which grows within us until it becomes a tree that can reach out its branches to shelter others. We respond by letting that love be like yeast, which we mix into the flour of our lives until it fills all of who we are and enables us to feed those

around us. And we respond by letting God's love be the net that we throw out wide into the world, welcoming all all all kinds of people into our hearts, our lives, and our communities.

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. We have been bought. We are God's own forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.