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*God's Beloved: Pearls of Great Value*

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Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 128; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

After his rapid-fire reciting of five short parables concerning the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus asks his listeners: “Have you understood all this?”

Without hesitating, the disciples respond with one voice, a resounding: “Yes!”

Now that “Yes”, coming from the very same disciples who only a few verses before were asking: “Why must you teach us in parables?” has to strike us as somewhat unbelievable. Add to that 2,000 years or so of church history with extended periods and frequent episodes in which we, the Church, quite clearly have not understood all of this, and one can begin to sympathize with Paul who appears to get it just right: “The

Spirit helps us in our weakness: for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

We do not know how to pray as we ought to ... Sighs too deep for words ...

A tiny book published a few years ago, called *Prayers and Graces of Thanksgiving*, by Paul Simpson McElroy, includes this prayer by an anonymous writer which I have often found helpful:

“Lord of the Universe, I am a simple man, an ignorant man. Oh, how I wish I had the words to fashion beautiful prayers to praise thee! But alas, I cannot find these words. So listen to me, O God, as I recite the letters of the alphabet. You know what I think and how I feel. Take these letters of the alphabet and you form the words that express the yearning, the love for Thee that is in my heart. Amen.”

“Have you understood all this?”

“Yes! Of course!” we – like the disciples – might be quick to reply.

But if we are honest, most of us should say: “No, not really.”

Years ago, not long after becoming Bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts, I heard Tom Shaw, speak to a group of Kentucky clergy on a three-day retreat. His meditations were centered on these five short parables we just heard. And while I don’t recall what he said about the other four stories, I still remember – all these years later – what he had to say about “The Pearl of Great Value.”

Bishop Shaw began by saying that our God is a very frugal and economical God, and does not waste one iota, not one little bit, of our life experience. Each moment we live and breathe on this fragile Earth,

God values, and savors, and uses. Every little moment, every little action, who we are, and what we do - especially the work we do for God's Kingdom – all of this is appreciated and woven into the ongoing work, and will, and wisdom of God's Creation.

A hidden truth embedded in the Good News of Jesus, and hidden in these parables like yeast in dough, is that at the end of the day each one of us is a Pearl of Great Value. Through our Baptism, we are made God's Beloved. And to show how very much our God loves us, he sends his only Son to walk among us, dwell among us, show us the way of true life, the way of the Lord.

So much does God savor our very human, and often flawed, life experience that he did not abandon us when we killed his Son, his only Son whom he loves, but returned him to us, so that wherever communities of Christians gather in his name, Jesus himself is in the midst of them, calling us back to the God from whence we come. Throughout our life, we are surrounded by God's love: we come from love, we return to love, and love is all around us. We are – each and every one of us - truly God's beloved.

Bishop Shaw urged us to think of ourselves as Pearls of Great Value, scattered about and hidden in this world, for which God was willing to pay a great price: the ultimate price. With the death of his only Son, God sacrificed all that he had to obtain us, to keep us. Through the Resurrection of his only Son, he promises to bring us back home to him.

So precious are we in the eyes of our God, said Bishop Shaw, that we really need to take time each day in our prayers to allow God the space and the time to thank us for what we have done for God today. Every day we should make time to sit in silence and allow ourselves to feel God thanking us for all that we do for God in this world.

But here is the tough question: Are we really capable of understanding, and believing, and knowing that God loves us that much? Can we each feel like we are Pearls of the Greatest Value? It is central to the life of faith to accept and receive God's love - to know how much our God values us and everything that we do.

This is why all these kingdom parables are so important for us to hear. This is the third week we have heard Jesus' parables on the Kingdom of Heaven. They each point to the hidden-ness of God's reign that already exists and is being brought into being in our very 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. And like the yeast, this faith of ours often remains hidden, unseen, unrecognized – until it is discovered, bursts forth, and its great power revealed.

The disciples ask Jesus for more faith before he sends them out into the world to continue the work of the Kingdom. But Jesus replies: "You don't need a heap of faith, but just a little bit. With just the smallest amount of faith you can move mountains. With just a little bit of faith you can heal the sick and raise the dead. With just a little faith you will do all the things that I do, and even greater things than these will you do!"

It all begins with faith. 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, the community, the nation, the world in which God has made his home with us, his beloved children.

How ought we to pray? Like the anonymous author of the alphabet prayer, we can recite the letters and leave it to God to put our thoughts together for us. But as Pearls of Great Value to God, we would do better to be still, and know that God is with us. In the stillness and in

the silence, give God the time to thank you for who you are: God's Beloved, with whom God is well pleased. As you thank God for what he does for you each day, allow God in return to thank you for what you have done for God today.

We do not need to do big, heroic, dramatic things to advance the construction of God's Kingdom. For in truth, as God's own Pearls of Great Value, each and every little thing we do brings a smile to God's face. And 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, God's Truly Beloved. And when we believe and act as God's Pearls of Great Value, soon the people around us and the people we meet begin to understand, and know, and feel that they too are Pearls of Great Value as well. And the world is changed, God's Kingdom brought closer.

Do you understand this?

Amen.