

“Searching for Joy”
The Fifth in a Series on the Parables of Matthew 13
Matthew 13:45-46
A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
Delivered at Oakland Christian Church, August 13, 2017

Today we conclude our study of five of the parables of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 13. Last week’s parable, The Parable of the Treasure Hidden in the Field, focused on the joy of discovering the Kingdom of God—that is, the joy of experiencing the redemptive activity of God in our lives. Like the agricultural worker who was going about his daily activity of plowing a field and unearthed buried treasure, there are times in our lives when we are surprised by joy. These serendipitous moments are totally unexpected flashes of divine grace breaking into our lives.

At other times, these transformative moments of discovering the redemptive activity of God in our lives come about only after a long and systematic spiritual quest. That is the focus of today’s parable, The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value.

In this parable, Jesus tells the story of a merchant searching to purchase fine pearls for his business. Based on the geography of the Holy Lands, his travels would have taken him to the shores of the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean. In his diligent search for fine pearls, he discovered a pearl of incomparable value. So overjoyed was he at finding a pearl of such wondrous value, he immediately liquidated the rest of his inventory in order to purchase that special pearl.

Obviously, this parable has much in common with last week’s parable. Both men were so overjoyed by their respective discoveries that they sold everything they owned in order to possess their exceptional finds. The difference between the parables is that last week the agricultural worker stumbled upon the treasure in the field while he was simply going about his normal daily activities of plowing, whereas in today’s parable the merchant was actively searching for fine pearls to add to his business inventory when he came upon a pearl of remarkable value.

After studying the Parables of Jesus for the past four weeks, the primary spiritual lesson arising from The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value is evident. The parable portrays in story form the same spiritual truth found in one of the pithy aphorisms Jesus uttered so poetically in the Sermon on the Mount:

Ask, and it will be given to you;
seek and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened to you.
For everyone who asks receives,
and everyone who seeks finds,

and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matt. 7:7-8)

Seek and you will find. *God may be hidden in the world, but God is not hiding.* This is an important distinction. *God may be hidden in the world, but God is not hiding.* In both words and deeds, Jesus constantly taught that the God of the universe is a self-revealing, self-disclosing God. God wants to be known by us; God wants to awaken us to the divine redemptive activity at work in the world and in our lives. Sometimes we are surprised by God, as in last week's parable; but other times this great joy is unveiled only at the end of a long process of deliberate spiritual searching. "Seek me and you will find me." That is the primary lesson of today's parable. In fact, I suggest that this is one of the chief lessons found throughout the Bible. For example, the prophet Jeremiah pictured God promising the people of Judea: "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with your whole heart" (Jer. 29:13).

This exciting truth means that we are not required to wait for those all-too-rare serendipitous moments when God's grace suddenly and unexpectedly breaks through the everyday experiences of life and reveal itself to us in an undeniable way—that is, when we are surprised by joy. No, this parable teaches that we can also seek joy. We can seek joy—that is, seek God—through various spiritual disciplines that we can learn to practice. Disciplines like worship, prayer, meditation, study, music, poetry, fellowship, service to others, and so forth. All of these disciplines, in their own unique ways, lead to greater knowledge of God and God's activity in our lives and in the world.

Of course, all Christians engage in a number of the spiritual disciplines to some extent; in fact, you are doing that this morning. Some of you participated in our coffee time this morning where you engaged in Christian fellowship. Some of you attended Sunday School where you participated in group study. All of you have engaged in worship and prayer, and are at this moment pondering the results of my own study this past week. Yes, all Christians engage in various spiritual disciplines to some extent.

But for most of us, as we grow in Christ, we will come to realize that one or two particular spiritual disciplines seem to be tailor-made for us. For example, as I began to grow spiritually, I soon found that the discipline of study was one of the most engaging and productive spiritual disciplines for me. Since that realization, I have spent many years practicing this discipline in an effort to strengthen and improve it, so not surprisingly, study is one of the primary ways that I experience those gracious occasions of joy produced by experiencing the redemptive activity of God in my life. It is usually through intense study that I come to know God better.

For you, however, you may discover that one of the other spiritual disciplines is tailor-made for you—perhaps prayer, or meditation, or worship through music, or service to others. We are not supposed to be cookie-cutter copies of one another; we are unique creations of God. God desires diversity and individuality. But even with all this glorious diversity that forms the church, the body of Christ, one thing is true: we need to discover the spiritual disciplines that work most effectively for each of us, and then we must dedicate ourselves to learning how

to practice them by devoting time and energy to them. After all, they are called spiritual disciplines or spiritual practices for a reason. You need to work at them if you are to become a master of the various disciplines.

Recall the merchant in today's parable. I doubt that I could tell the difference between a "fine pearl" and a "pearl of surpassing value." But the pearl merchant could. He had honed his skills so that he could experience the joy of finding this pearl of exceptional value. In like manner, let us hone our personal spiritual disciplines so that we may become more and more capable of perceiving spiritual pearls of incomparable value—that is, joyous instances of God's redemptive activity in our lives and in our world.

God may be hidden in the world, but God is not hiding. The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value teaches that we will experience incomparable encounters with God's redemptive activity in our lives when we engage in the disciplined spiritual search for joy.

And that's today's good news. Amen.