

Matthew 13:45-46

Again, 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.

Encompassed by Love

So last week I talked about approaching prayer knowing that you, along with the rest of creation, belong to God, but if you believe otherwise, if you insist on believing that some part of this universe belongs to you, you're going to have trouble in praying because you have put up an artificial wall between you and God, claiming something to be yours which really isn't. I like to play ball with Archie, our dog. But Archie doesn't always understand that for me to play ball with him, he has to let go of ball so I can throw it to him. Well it's the same principle with God; if we think that the ball is ours and don't give it to God, it's hard for us to pray. We must strive to give up everything, because the more we hold back, the less we enter into God's true presence and the emptier our prayer become.

And so for your homework, I left you with two questions:

- 1. What are the things that I am most attached to?**
- 2. What would help me let go of them?**

Because the sooner we can let go completely of the idea that anything in this world really belongs to us, the sooner we can come completely into God's presence. We don't have to wait until we die and we have no choice about giving up anything that we're attached to; we can enter God's Kingdom anytime.

And Jesus' Parable of the Pearl that Greg just read teaches us just how precious the Kingdom of Heaven is. The Kingdom is like a pearl that is worth everything you have. It's well worth it to abandon the idea that you can possess anything, because when you do give up everything you inherit the Kingdom, which is the most precious thing in the universe.

But what is it that makes the Kingdom so precious? What is it that makes the Kingdom worth everything you have? It's because upon entering the Kingdom of God **you become totally encompassed in the love of God**. John writes, "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8). God is love, and to give up everything thing you have for that love is to allow that love to completely embrace you. It allows the light of God to shine brightly upon you, so that nothing gets in the way of it.

But it may be too abstract for me to simply say, “God is love.” We can say it, but can we really feel it? Love is a word that gets tossed around a lot, and it gets stepped on a lot. Adolescents often confuse love with physical attraction so that the expression “I love you” usually means “I love the way you make me feel” which means when that person no longer makes you feel that way you no longer love them; the truth is you never really loved them in the first place; you loved yourself and the way that person made you feel. I would say that if you live your life apart from God it can take you a lifetime to come anywhere close to knowing what love really is. True prayer brings you in direct contact with the author of love, and Jesus, the truest and holiest expression of God’s love. We know God’s love through the provisions he makes for us – the bodies he gave us which can move and enjoy the beauty of creation and the cool of an air conditioner, the taste of honey and the smell of fresh baked bread. But we know the depth of God’s love in Jesus, the one who knew our pains and suffering, and the one who said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13) then went on to do exactly that; lay down his life for us. I believe that if we truly comprehend who Jesus is and the depth of his love we would willingly surrender everything we have to him and be excited about meeting him in our prayers.

My final three years of high school were at a private all-boys “prep” school in Richmond, VA. It was an Episcopal private school, and three mornings each week we had to attend a chapel service where we sang a hymn or two and listened to the chaplain preach a message that we would likely forget. But I remember that one day, during chapel service, the chaplain had a guest speaker, a black Episcopal pastor from Africa who spoke English very well. I remember his smile and serenity, and his accent. I don’t remember much about his message, and it wasn’t until years later that I realized that the black pastor was none other than Bishop Desmond Tutu before he was a bishop, before he had won the Nobel Peace Prize. I was amazed when I came to realize this: Desmond Tutu was at my little high school, speaking to a few hundred mostly white kids. And I say that if I had known who he was and how famous he would become, I would have been far more interested in attending that chapel service. I would have stuck around after the service to talk to him, get his autograph, and how amazing would it have been if I had started corresponding with him. Desmond Tutu would likely be the same person, but I would probably be somebody different. I have heard of people’s experience with Bishop Tutu, of how amazed they are to find a man of such renown who seeks to know you, asks questions about your life, who looks straight into your eyes and seems to always be smiling. I look upon this as a missed opportunity. But we need not miss this opportunity with God. We can be in the presence of greatness, encompassed by love that knows no limit.

We may be a little nervous about entering God's presence, and that's fine. In fact you should be nervous. If I were invited to meet with Bishop Tutu today, I would think about what I would like to say to him and what I would like to ask him. I would get a haircut and shave, iron my pants and shirt, not forget the deodorant or to brush my teeth. I'd be well rested and work out my transportation so that I was sure to be early. The point is that I would recognize what an honor it is to be in his presence. It's appropriate to come into God's presence with the same reverence.

But we shouldn't postpone meeting with God. I had a particular habit when I was in college many many years ago; if I had a big paper that was due in the coming days, I would clean off my desk, I would make sure that I had coffee and snacks readily available, I would make sure my typewriter ribbon was good, that I had all the paper and supplies and everything available, then I would put on some music, then I would sweep the floor, then mop it, then I'd do my laundry, then I'd go to dinner, then I'd call my parents...you get the idea. I would get completely prepared to work on my paper, but it would take me the longest time to start working on it. We might approach prayer the same way, spending all our time and energy getting prepared to pray before actually praying. We should not dawdle. We should not keep God waiting too long. God is waiting to change your life, to enrich it and to sanctify it. Go to him. Give him your best. And be ready for his love to encompass you.

Next week we'll talk about the loving embrace and something that Douglas Steere calls "The Chamber of Loving Scrutiny." Ask yourself these two questions:

1. What is it about me that I wish God didn't see?
2. Who are the people that I have the hardest time loving?

Next week we will explore the grace of God that allows us to change dramatically.