

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta

“The One Pearl of Great Value” (Matthew 13:45-46)

July 26, 2020

Dave Johnson

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

One of my favorite memories from my early childhood is my mom reading me stories. I especially loved books from the famous *Little Golden Books* series, which included such literary standbys as *The Saggy Baggy Elephant*, *The Fuzzy Duckling*, *The Tawny Scrawny Lion and the Clever Monkey*, and one of the bestselling children’s books of all time, *The Pokey Little Puppy*. Some of these I ended up reading to my own kids many years later.

If I were to ask you what some of your favorite stories were when you were a child, what children’s books were read to you by a parent or grandparent or teacher, you could recall specific stories and books. Perhaps some of you were never read children’s books because your parents or teachers immediately began by reading you Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, or Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, or Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*—all surefire hits with little children.

Some of the most popular songs are songs with a memorable story, so memorable in fact that you could sing right along with them—songs like *Harper Valley P.T.A.* by Jeannie Riley, *Coward of the County* by Kenny Rogers, *Love Story* by Taylor Swift, or of course *The Devil Went Down to Georgia* by the late Charlie Daniels: “The devil went down to Georgia he was lookin’ for a soul to steal. He was in a bind ‘cause he was way behind, and he was willing to make a deal...”—you could jump right in.

Maybe you had a Sunday school teacher or a Vacation Bible School teacher who taught you Bible stories and introduced you to Noah and the ark full of all kinds of animals, to Moses and the exodus, complete with plagues of flies and frogs and darkness, to David and the giant Goliath, or to Jonah being swallowed and later regurgitated by the whale (such a lovely story). Or maybe you were in a Christmas pageant where you learned stories about Mother Mary and Baby Jesus and wise men on camels with camels with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Your family has a story—complete with a variety of characters, exemplary heroes and notorious villains, and plenty of seemingly nondescript family members often overlooked or forgotten. Every family has a story complete with its own geographic and socio-economic setting, its own twists and turns of plot, its own episodes of triumph and tragedy. Each one of you could tell memorable stories that have been passed down to you about your family history.

Your individual life has a story. If you were to write down your life as a story (those of you who journal may already be doing that), it would include people who have impacted your life—positively or negatively, or both. It would include chapters about high water marks in your life that you would want to reread and perhaps want others to read too, as well as chapters you would never want to read again, let alone have anyone else read. The story of your life probably includes some cliffhangers, situations or circumstances you never imagined and could not see any way out of or through, and yet if you read on your life story you see that somehow God did bring you through. Every one of us has your own unique story, a story about which God cares as much as God cares about you, which is infinitely and immeasurably.

Stories stick with you.

Jesus knew this, and so one of the primary ways he preached and taught about what Matthew referred to as “the kingdom of heaven”—God’s unconditional love for the world and for you—was through brief stories called parables. Each of Jesus’ parables reveals a specific aspect of God’s unconditional love in Jesus Christ. When it comes to Jesus’ parables the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel According to Matthew is one of the most famous chapters in the Bible because it overflows with parables, one after another. Today’s passage from this chapter contains this short yet profound parable: “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls” Jesus said, “on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:45-46).

There are moments in the story of your life when you have a choice as to whether or not you will go all in, whether or not you will put all your chips on the table, whether or not you will put your career or your finances or your reputation on the line—or, much more importantly, put your heart on the line.

Perhaps in one way or another you have risked everything for something or someone you thought would be “a pearl of great value”—and metaphorically or literally you have sold all you had to buy it. Unfortunately sometimes this backfires. Along these lines I will juxtapose two illustrations—one from a classic book by Nobel Prize winning author John Steinbeck, and the other from a classic cartoon featuring the incomparable Daffy Duck (yes, you heard that correctly).

In his famous 1947 novella *The Pearl*, which you may have read in a high school English class, John Steinbeck tells the story about a poor pearl fisherman named Kino who unexpectedly finds a huge oyster containing an extraordinarily large pearl which he calls “The Pearl of the World.” Kino is convinced that this “pearl of great value,” this “Pearl of the World” will solve all his problems. But as often happens with those who unexpectedly find themselves rich—perhaps after receiving a large inheritance or winning a lottery—there was a variety of responses from those who knew Kino, as Steinbeck wrote:

All manner of people grew interested in Kino—people with things to sell and people with favors to ask. Kino had found the Pearl of the World. The essence of pearl mixed with the essence of men and a curious dark residue was precipitated. Every man suddenly became related to Kino’s pearl, and Kino’s pearl went into the dreams, the speculations, the schemes, the plans, the futures, the wishes, the needs, the lusts, the hungers, of everyone, and only one person stood in the way and that was Kino, so that he became curiously every man’s enemy. The news stirred up something infinitely black and evil in the town; the black distillate was like the scorpion, or like hunger in the smell of food, or like loneliness when love is withheld. The poison sacs of the town began to manufacture venom, and the town swelled and puffed with the pressure of it (*The Short Novels of John Steinbeck* 564).

Over the course of the story this “Pearl of the World” that Kino found and that he thought would make everything in his life better, proved to wreak havoc and destruction in his life and his family, so much so that at the end of the story Kino hurls it as far as he can right back into the sea—and there, as Steinbeck put it, “the pearl lay on the floor of the sea. A crab scampering over the bottom raised a little cloud of sand, and when it settled the pearl was gone. And the music of the pearl drifted to a whisper and disappeared” (610).

One of the many reasons I need therapy is that I watched a ton of cartoons as a kid, especially the famous *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* cartoons featuring characters like Bugs Bunny, and my personal favorite, Daffy Duck. In a 1957 cartoon entitled *Ali Baba Bunny* Daffy Duck, thinking he has all the riches he could ever want, describes himself this way, “Oh boy, I’m rich, I’m wealthy, I’m independent, I’m socially secure, I’m rich, I’m rich, I’m rich, I’m rich!” Later Daffy Duck is looking over the cave where he has accumulated his unimaginable riches, making sure he has not missed anything, when he finds a lamp. He rubs the lamp and sure enough a genie emerges, “I am the genie of the lamp, O master!” But Daffy Duck slams the lamp down and shouts, “Oh, no you don’t! You want my treasure! Well it’s mine, understand? Mine!” And as Daffy Duck stomps the genie back into the lamp he continues his tirade, “Down, down, go, go, mine!”

The enraged genie reemerges from the lamp in a fury, “You have desecrated the spirit of the lamp! Prepare to take the consequences!” Daffy Duck dismisses the genie’s warning, “Consequences schmonsequences, as long as I’m rich!” Then the genie strikes him with lightning and shrinks him into a tiny miniscule Daffy Duck.

The final scene in the cartoon features Bugs Bunny relaxing on the beach. As he opens an oyster he remarks, “I wonder how that crazy duck every made out with that genie” and then finds a surprise in the oyster, “Hey, what do you know, a pearl!” Then the tiny miniscule Daffy Duck scurries out of a hole in the sand and sprints to the oyster, “It’s mine, understand? Mine, mine, all mine, go, go, go! Mine, do you hear me?!” He scrambles into the oyster and wraps his little duck self around the pearl and continues, “Out, out, out! Mine, mine, mine!” “Oh brother,” Bugs Bunny concludes, “Close sesame.” And as the oyster shell closes Daffy Duck gloats, “I’m rich! I’m a happy miser!” Cue music, roll credits.

Maybe in some way you can relate to either Kino or Daffy Duck. Maybe your version of the Pearl of the World you thought would make your life better has led to your undoing, or maybe you are still wrapped around it, clutching it.

Going back to Jesus’ short parable about the kingdom of heaven being like someone who “on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it”...you may think I will say that the Christian faith is that pearl for which you need to sell all that you have in order to buy it.

You may think I will cite scriptures like what Jesus said later in Matthew's account of the gospel, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25). You may think I will tell you that you need to be like the merchant Jesus talked about and sell everything you have, give up everything you have, in order to buy the one pearl of great value.

But that is not the gospel; it is a response to the gospel.

When it comes to Jesus' parable about finding the "one pearl of great value" the gospel is this: the "one pearl of great value"...is you.

During Holy Week, as happened with Kino in Steinbeck's story, "All manner of people grew interested" in Jesus. And yet in spite of all his parables and miracles and countless acts of grace Jesus still "curiously became every man's enemy" until "the news stirred up something infinitely black and evil in the town" of Jerusalem and "the poison sacs of the town began to manufacture venom, and the town swelled and puffed with the pressure of it." And on Good Friday these sacs of venom burst, and in spite of the specter of God's judgment the collective response was "Consequences schmonsequences, as long as I'm rich!"

And yet, just like the merchant in his parable, Jesus still "went and sold all that he had" by giving his life on the cross in order to buy you, "the one pearl of great value," back, and in doing so took all the consequences of your wrong actions upon himself.

Although "the devil went down to Georgia lookin' for a soul to steal," Jesus went to earth lookin' for a soul to heal...your soul because again, the "one pearl of great value" is you—of such great value Jesus considered it worth it to die for you.

So if somehow you have been wounded by what you considered the Pearl of the World, may the Holy Spirit heal your heart with the actual gospel. Jesus Christ, your Creator and Redeemer, who has fully known and fully loved you through every chapter in the story of your life, gave his life to buy you back because yes, God loves you that much, and yes, the "one pearl of great value" is you.

Amen.