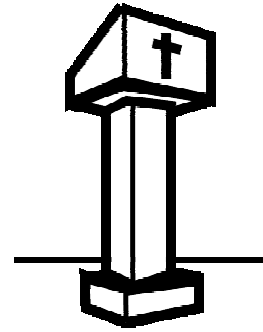


Sermon Synopsis
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Preached by Fr. Peter Champion
July 24, 2011



Last week we looked at the first part of the story of Jacob. Those of you who were here will remember that Jacob was the grandson of Abraham and the son of Isaac; together they are the three patriarchs from whom the people of Israel descended. Even today, some of our prayers are to the “God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” One of the ways the church has seen itself since the very beginning is as the “new Israel.” So these stories of Jacob are our family stories.

We saw last week that Jacob was a trickster or a rogue who’d cheated his twin brother Esau out of his birthright as the firstborn, and then out of his father Isaac’s deathbed blessing. Esau was so angry, and rightfully so, that Jacob had to run away from home to save his skin. And last week’s story—of Jacob’s dream of the angels ascending and descending Jacob’s ladder—took place during his flight.

As we pick up the story a number of years later, Jacob has met his distant relation Laban and has fallen hard for the younger of Laban’s two daughters, Rachel. In fact, Jacob agreed to work for seven years as an indentured servant in order to win the right to marry Rachel. As we rejoin the story, Jacob finally gets to marry Rachel and went with her to the bridal chamber for their first night of connubial bliss. But when he woke up, he discovered that he’d been tricked by Laban, who had sent him off to bed with Leah, Rachel’s big sister. When Jacob confronted Laban, Laban said, “In our country we don’t marry off the younger daughter first, so I gave you Leah. But work another seven years and you can have Rachel too.”

Now, Jacob must really have loved Rachel, because he agreed to the deal. And after a second seven years, the story tells us that he finally got to marry the woman of his dreams, Rachel. I don’t know how many men would have agreed to that kind of deal. You know the saying, “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me...”

In our Gospel this morning, Jesus tells five parables to help his disciples and us begin to imagine what the kingdom of heaven is like:

- There is **the parable of the mustard seed**, which starts small but grows to an enormous size.
- Then there’s **the parable of the yeast**, where a woman adds 3 measures of yeast to a large quantity of flour, and the whole batch is leavened. I always think of the “I Love Lucy” episode where Lucy adds 13 cakes of yeast to some bread dough instead of 1/3 cake. When Ethel shows Lucy the recipe, Lucy says, “Ah, they’re small cakes.” But then Lucy opens the kitchen door, and there is bread dough taking over the apartment!



- The third **parable is of the treasure hidden** in a field. The man who discovers the treasure sells everything to buy the field and get the treasure.
- The fourth, though I'm going out of order, is the **parable of the fishing net**, which nets good and bad fish alike. Just as the fishermen sort the good from the bad, so the angels will sort good souls from bad when the kingdom is ushered in.
- The fifth parable—the one I'm going to focus on—is the **story of the pearl of great value**, or as we knew it growing up, the pearl of great price. In it, a pearl merchant finds the perfect pearl, the one he's been looking for his entire career. So beautiful and valuable is this pearl that the merchant liquidates all his assets in order to buy it. As commentators remark, the merchant is left with the pearl and the clothes on his back, having given up home, possessions, other merchandise and even food for the sake of buying that pearl. I think that this parable asks us to think about what we'd be willing to sacrifice greatly for—what is our pearl of great price?



In the story of Jacob, Rachel is the pearl for which Jacob labors 14 years, in the face of deceit and disappointment. We might not get it, but for Jacob, Rachel was the one.

The truth is, of course, that we can and sometimes do expend ourselves and our resources for all sorts of things. For example, a friend of mine in Klamath Falls lived for the day when he could buy a brand new Harley, customized just the way he wanted. Danny and his wife had three children, and they took good care of the kids, so there wasn't a lot of extra income. But by scrimping and saving, Danny finally saved enough to get the motorcycle of his dreams. And the day he got his Harley, Danny looked like he'd died and gone to heaven. He was so excited he could barely contain himself. Danny had finally gotten his pearl.

Now, to be honest, Harleys aren't my thing. I'd love to ride a motorcycle, but the two things Susan won't let me do are ride motorcycles and jump out of airplanes. Those are the price of staying married to her, and she's worth it... But while I can't imagine a Harley as my pearl of great price, I can say that others do. And while buying a Harley isn't what I'd give everything to do, the decision is morally neutral.

Other people, however, set something less benign as the pearl for which they are willing to give all. As I've listened to the unfolding story of the bombing and shooting in Norway which claimed over 75 lives, I've heard reports that the confessed bomb maker and shooter bragged to police that he spent 50,000 Euros of his own money (that's about \$70,000) to carry out these evil deeds. Apparently, the things for which he was willing to spend himself and his resources were death and terror. For some, then, the pearl can be something evil and destructive.

And finally, some pearls are truly good and beautiful. I've been listening this week to a set of CDs called "Voices of the Shoah." (Shoah is the Hebrew word for what we call the Holocaust.) And that has led me to think of my own family's story.

Most of you don't know that my mother was born and raised in Vienna, Austria. Her mother was Roman Catholic and her father was Jewish. When the German's annexed Austria in 1938, my mother's family faced Nazi persecution. In the Nazi's eyes, my mother was a Jew. However, in the spring of 1939, my mother, then 16, was able to

leave Austria by train and travel to England and, later, on to the U.S., on what has come to be known as a *kindertransport* train. Roughly 10,000 children were evacuated this way, through the efforts of people of faith in England and the U.S.

Now the transportation and care provided to these children were given freely by many people. But in order to leave Austria, my mother needed an exit visa from the German authorities, and those were expensive. My grandparents impoverished themselves to put together the financial resources needed to get my mother that precious exit visa, even though they had to stay behind through the entire Second World War. They went through the humiliating process of applying for the visa, which required countless trips to offices and hours spent waiting to be seen.

My grandmother and grandfather emerged from the war alive, but financially and emotionally scarred, and came to the U.S. in 1947. My grandfather, who'd once been a bank manager, worked as an elevator operator. My grandmother's price was even higher—she suffered severe mental illness which required repeated hospitalization, shock therapy and lifelong use of antipsychotic medication.

But my grandmother and grandfather paid these prices—willingly and at their own great risk—to ensure my mother's escape and a safe future. Her survival was their pearl of great price. I find myself incredible humbled by the sacrifices they made for their daughter, my mother. I'm reminded of the Talmudic saying, "Whoever saves one person saves the whole world." Surely their actions were expressions of their faiths and their love for their daughter. And without their sacrifices, I wouldn't be standing here today telling you this story.

We've seen that people are willing to give their all to achieve all sorts of different goals. Some, like the Norwegian terrorist, work towards evil ends. Some, like my friend Danny and his Harley, value things we don't relate to, but which are in themselves neither good nor bad. And some people, like my grandparents, give their all in the service of others.

The parable of the pearl invites us to reflect on what our pearls of great price are. Jesus suggests that the kingdom of heaven is a good place to start our thinking. What do we value? What are we willing to spend our resources on? And what are we willing to spend our very being on? A motorcycle? Bombs and bullets? A wife like Rachel? Our child's life? As followers of Jesus, may our pearls be pearls which are as beautiful as the kingdom of heaven.