

Is This Real?

We just finished our Vacation Bible School at Grace Lutheran. One day during snack time a six-year-old girl approached me. She clutched something in her right hand. She opened her hand and exposed two shiny red gemstones. She explained that she had found them in a sandbox in our playground. The recess leader assured the children that there were gems hidden in the sand. In faith, she took a shovel in hand and dug. The two gems were the fruit of her labor.

She had a question for me: "Pastor Ed, are these real?"

Her question revealed a conflict in her inner being. A part of her hoped against hope that they were real gemstones and that she had a small fortune in her hands. Another part of her suspected that the glittering ruby red stones in her hand were fake. My response to her question was to assure her that her treasure was "real costume jewelry." The stones were pretending to be rubies.

My conversation with that child made me reflect on the gospel lesson for Sunday. *"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."* (Matthew 13:45-46)

Like the little girl, that merchant was on the hunt for a precious gem. He believed a perfect pearl was out there and he went to look for it. I am sure that in his travels he saw many pearls. Up to that very day every pearl the merchant had inspected revealed defects. Perhaps the color was off. Perhaps its shape was irregular. A perfect pearl is a perfectly round sphere. The nacre might have been too thin. (Nacre is also known as mother-of-pearl, it is the iridescent material secreted by an oyster which covers an irritant the oyster can't flush out. The oyster keeps covering the irritant with nacre and thus creates a pearl). There may have been tiny bumps or scratches on the pearl's surface. All the other pearls he had seen lacked "luster." Luster refers to a pearl's ability to shine brightly, and sharply reflect light. A pearl is said to have excellent "luster" if you see your own reflection on its surface.

One day he came upon the perfect pearl. It was the pearl itself that declared its perfection. Its color was perfect and it was perfectly round. The nacre which covered it was thick. Its surface was flawless. Its size was remarkable. Most importantly, the merchant could clearly see his reflection in the surface of the pearl; therefore, its luster was perfect. He had to have this pearl. It was all he ever wanted and needed. So, he sold everything to acquire it.

What is the pearl in Matthew 13:45-46? It is Jesus Christ and his Gospel. The Gospel is so beautifully summarized in John 3:16: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" When we hear the four Gospel's, the Holy Spirit can work through those words and give us the eyes to see Jesus as the perfect pearl.

Every perfect pearl is capable of clearly reflecting the image of its beholder. Jesus declared: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." The four Gospels testify that Jesus reflected his Father's divine image. Divinity radiated from his sublime teaching and the miracles he performed. The miracles revealed his power over nature, blindness, deafness, muteness, physical deformity, disease, death and evil spirits. His divine glory was revealed when Satan inflicted and assailed Jesus with every temptation known to humanity and he not succumb to temptation. His divinity was also reflected by his perfect obedience to God's laws. The perfect pearl also reflected his humanity. Jesus had to eat and sleep like all of us. He died like all of us.

At the center of every pearl there is an irritant usually a jagged piece of rock or shell. This irritant is the cause of the beautiful pearl. At the center or heart of Jesus' Gospel, there is an irritant. It is his cross. God gave Jesus as a sacrifice for sin. He declared that Jesus was a substitute for us and piled our sins on Jesus' back. His suffering and death atoned for human sin. He paid the price for our sin on the first Good Friday, he died and was placed in a tomb. Three days later, on the first Easter Sunday, Jesus rose from the dead. His glorious resurrection covered the suffering and heartbreak of the cross in the same way nacre covers the irritant at the center of a pearl.

Through the proclamation of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit gives us faith and permits us to see Jesus as the incomparable Son of God, the one and only sacrifice for our sin and the one and only doorway to eternal life. The Spirit permits us to see our sin on the cross that is at the center of the perfect pearl. The Spirit permits us to see God cover our sin with Jesus' atoning suffering and death, his perfect life and his resurrection from the dead. Faith permits us to let go of all the other treasures we hold onto and grasp the most perfect pearl which we can carry our whole lives and will carry us into eternity.

Stop digging for costume jewelry. Come meet the pearl of great price. We do at Grace Lutheran Sunday mornings at 9:00 and 10:30. See you there.

In Christ
Pastor Ed