

It's always a challenge when a parable becomes a catchphrase.

The 'pearl of great price' means different things to different people, but when Jesus' people throw this phrase into a conversation, you can bet they are talking about...well, what exactly are they talking about?

The promise of eternal life? A lifetime of safe and secure in the Saviour's arms? A world where 'Christian Values' (so called) rule the day?

As with anything in Scripture, we take a grave chance by offering images, and ideas out of their context. And this series of parables is no exception.

Jesus is trying to paint a picture for his disciples - and he is using parables. He spends much of this chapter of Matthew's gospel explaining why - and even offers a precise (?) explanation for a particular parable - but then he lays out an interesting pattern.

The kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field...and like a valuable pearl...and like a net full of all kinds of fish. And the reason we don't often hear these parables all together, is that most of us want to know - which one is it? How can the kingdom be like ALL of these? We like our metaphors simple and singular, thank you very much. And these three are so different...

The treasure in a field - lost for so long, then found by some lucky human...who stops at nothing to make it their own. But at the end of the day, the treasure is still hidden. Does this mean that the kingdom is personal...or private...?

Not so the pearl. Everyone can see the beauty of this item. It's 'on the market,' and goes to the highest bidder. Does this mean the kingdom can be bought? Is it a matter of pride? Something to be displayed as a prize?

I understand that the kingdom is a 'valuable thing.' And beautiful...and mysterious...but either of these parables on their own leave more questions (for me) than they answer about what the kingdom is, or how we might discover that

precious, mysterious state of being. And so, the next parable in the sequence starts to round out the picture.

A net full of fish - a lifetime full of experiences - some better than others, but each one important in the long run. The good are made known by comparing them to the bad. Some fish are for eating. Some are not. Lessons often learned the hard way. And the bad are rejected - the good, celebrated. The kingdom is like THAT too, Jesus says.

Here, at least, we have fewer arguments. We may not enjoy the imagery of fire and gnashing of teeth, but this makes some sense to us. Though it is important to remember that the decision makers (where good and bad / worthy and not worthy are concerned) are not mortal. Too often we take these metaphors as an excuse to do our own judging and sorting...but we are not qualified. This is a job for 'the angels.'

So, there's another wrench in the works where our understanding of the organization of the kingdom is concerned. The church - long convinced that we are the gatekeepers of God - can rest easy. We don't have that responsibility. So to sum up - the kingdom is a mystery - and a beautiful thing - and a place where good and evil are clearly defined and sorted accordingly. And while it might be our pleasure to pursue this kingdom's goals and seek this kingdom's refuge, we cannot own it - we don't hold the keys - it's not ours to display as a trophy - no matter what we may have been told.

No, the trick to these parables is to take a bigger bite - to see how they hold together. And the key to this particular series of statements is still to come. Jesus stop as asks "Do you get it? Are you following me?" He has offered a gradually expanding view of the kingdom - a mindset that includes beauty and mystery and discretion and judgement - and then he offers the key. 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

The one who is trained for the kingdom - who can see the different attributes - who can imagine beyond a single dimension - this is what a disciple must be.

Jesus is training people for the kingdom. He offers a variety of images - a full range of possibilities - and the wisdom of the spirit to decide and discern. There is treasure to be discovered - sometimes hidden, sometimes obvious - and other times mixed among the trash - and disciples of Jesus need the eyes to see and discover - to recognize the kingdom, which is no single thing, but is part of everything.

Turns out, the keys to the kingdom are not just for those who can 'pay the price.' Jesus never advocated putting all your eggs in one basket; that's not how God works. The kingdom is hidden in plain sight. And those who would follow Jesus - who listen for his words and who stand in awe of his risen glory - we are being trained for the kingdom...to recognize it...to celebrate it...to share its beauty and mystery with the world.

If there's a better job to have – a better way to live - I can't think of it.