

Rev. Dr. Julia Burkey
February 20, 2022
Imagination & Play

Jeremiah 29:11-13

‘For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.’

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.’

Well we have entered into week three of parables alongside the children in Sunday school, as a way to plant seeds of connection with them. We have spent time with small mustard seeds, that we are trusting are already strewn about in the earth, that hope is slowly being nurtured in the earth which will bloom into abundance.

And last week, the kingdom of God was like yeast, leaven, or was it like a woman? And Jesus, thanks to insights from the Gospel of Thomas, was a hardcore feminist asking us, telling us, from across time, to add a little leaven, to relax our shoulders and unclench our jaws and have a little fun with the kingdom of God stuff, and in his most Jesus-y way inviting us, to, well, lighten up.

Is it sacrilegious to wonder if there is humor in the gospels? Does it open things up for us to imagine Jesus making people laugh as he churned out these unusual sayings? Elton Trueblood, in his seminal book *The Humor of Christ* written in 1964 wrote,

“There are numerous passages . . . which are practically incomprehensible when regarded as sober prose, but which are luminous once we become liberated from the gratuitous assumption that Christ never joked... Once we realize that Christ was not always engaged in pious talk, we have made an enormous step on the road to understanding.”

Turns out when we read the in the cadence of a stand-up comedian or an improv actor, or a child, the stories open up a little more.

Trueblood tells the inspiration for writing his book *The Humor of Christ*. He says, “We were reading to our eldest son from the seventh chapter of Matthew’ Gospel, feeling very serious, when suddenly the little boy began to laugh. He laughed because he saw how preposterous it would be for a man to be so deeply concerned about a speck in another person’s eye, that he was unconscious of the fact that his own eye had a beam in it...His laughter was a rebuke to his parents for their failure to respond to humor in an unexpected place.”

It takes the imagination of a child to hear these words in their intent. Jesus might contradict Paul when he tells us to put away our childlike ways. So how about our parable for today?

‘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.’

Everyone knows, that this isn’t a very good merchant. Everyone knows a prudent merchant buys things for less than they are worth and sells them for more than they are worth. He has a supply of merchandise, and he sells it all, for a single pearl for himself. The merchant is no longer a merchant by the end of this parable, but just a guy with a pearl. He gets out of the rat race. He gets off the hamster wheel.

Then Jesus recommends we be like the merchant!

This parable felt like an invitation to me into imagination and play. I wanted to act it out. “The imagination is the golden pathway to everywhere.” Says Terence McKenna

“Play is the mediator of the invisible and visible.”

Dora M. Kalff, Jungian analyst

“Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.”

- Albert Einstein

So before we begin our little skit, I ask you: What is the most valuable thing in your possession that you cannot buy with money? Really, I am asking you. (*family, child, the working for justice, moments of peace, my call, the part of my soul connected to God*)

Hello fellow merchant, I am here to sell you things. You know your life needs to be improved, YOU need to be improved, and you don’t have enough things. What is it you are looking for today? I have Jewels, gems, rocks, silver and gold, things for you to buy then to sell at the marketplace for a commission soon. Treasures of all sorts, treasures that you can only begin to imagine.

If the merchant were talking to me, they might say, “You can purchase a new website for your business, completely written already in the perfect tone and theology for your church and it is modern and eye-catching all at once, and it updates itself! Or you could purchase a brand-new kitchen, it’s actually a smart kitchen, which has the self-cooking and self-cleaning and features, or a new electric car with great snow tires, and climate positive flights to warm places! ahh with this you can have affordable childcare and a very expensive baby sleep consultant.” What treasure do you want, that you think would improve your life?

Oh this? (points to a box on the altar with pearls hanging out) You ask what is in this box? You can’t afford this. You are still interested? It is something so precious, the most precious thing here... in possession of this, if you truly comprehended what it is, all your longings would cease. You would know peace, infinite connection, eternal love from within yourself, you would know that you have everything you need already. It is more of a way of being- It has less to do with just you, really it is good for everyone. It is the only gemstone made from the divine mystery of

the sea. Yes, it is a fine pearl, mother of pearl, It is a bit more difficult to grasp, money cannot really buy this- it is a risk to own it, Yes, it would be extravagant. Yes, it would be lavish. In some ways you already have this, within you. (holds a mirror to the congregation)

What is the most valuable thing in your possession that you cannot buy with money? Really, I am asking you. (*family, relationships, child, the working for justice, moments of peace, my call, the part of my soul connected to God*)

THAT brings you closer to the kingdom of God.

What if, the soul of the person who, rather than thinking everything needed to be improved, knew, that we have everything we need, right in this moment, that right now is enough. What if that cultivation of soul was the starting point, for an entry into the kingdom of heaven?

Your soul is a precious piece of art, co-created with God. If you knew what you were already in possession of, your heart would forever rest in love, and your suffering and restlessness would cease. You would know peace. Or maybe you'd just be a really bad businessman.

Benediction:

A Tiny Prayer (for those who are being too hard on themselves) by The Rev. Micah Bucey

May you pause your stagnating self-criticism and bring your attention back to the honest, activating truth, that you are a miracle, really, someone who has weathered grief and disappointment, who has lifted others when they couldn't get up, woke up this morning, no matter how weary, to try it all again, and if there are apologies you should make today, may you not run from them, if there are recommitments you should make today, may you move toward them, but no matter what direction you follow for goodness' sake, may you never forget that you are a creation in process, unfinished, of course but even in the midst of your agonizing messy progress, still never anything less than a work of art.

Amen