July 21, 2019

Sermon for Richland Presbyterian Church

Who Are You/Who Am I

Texts: Matthew 13:44-46 (Parable of the Pearl of Great Price)

 Philippians 2:1-11 (…emptied himself…)

Also consider Psalm 8 (Who is mankind…little lower than the angels)

Hymns The Church’s One Foundation

 O Lord, Our God, How Excellent

When I was in seminary, those many years ago, in my Homiletics course (basic preaching), we were given a pop-quiz of sorts. We were told that we always had to be ready to preach any time on a moment’s notice. And then we were given a slip of paper with a Bible Text on it. Less than ten minutes later we were to offer a sermon of at least ten minutes. My text was Matthew 13:45-46, The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price. Hmmm…Nothing all that difficult. The Pearl is generally taken to mean Jesus Christ, or Salvation, of Entry into Heaven and the Merchant is generally taken to mean the person who searches for and finally receives Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior. The Kingdom of Heaven is filled with individuals who have surrendered all that they were, meaning confessed all sin and personal priorities in life, and then receiving salvation entry into Heaven. But then as I stood up to preach the thought came to me that maybe I had gotten the Parable wrong, that what if the Pearl was the individual loved, and sought out by God, the merchant, and the great price was God’s Son, Christ Jesus on the Cross. What if I, or you, were the Pearl so precious to God that God somehow paid the price of my sins in the Cross? ( Parable of the Hidden Treasure immediately preceding the Parable of the Pearl works the same way. The Kingdom of heaven is like, can be described as filled with what were once hidden treasures, and what were once precious pearls, now purchased out of the earthly world into the Spiritual World into the very presence of our Triune Living Lord God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I preached the sermon, got the “A” and the thought has remained with me influencing much of my understanding of Christian Faith.

The passage I read from Philippians, and which is reworked in our Statement of Faith this morning, teaches that in the Incarnation, the Son of God, Jesus, emptied himself of all that was God, divinity, power, knowledge and more in order to dwell with us and to die for us on the Cross. But skeptics and those of other religious traditions challenge this truth by asking, Why? Why would God do that? Go to that extreme? There is no other religious or spiritual traditions which makes so extreme an assertion, only Christianity. And the answer is simply, profoundly, To purchase the Priceless Pearl! (Just to sound like a Calvinist, Once bought it cannot be unbought.)

What comes from this is not some arrogant conceit that we are better than others. But that we might humble ourselves into God’s service by looking to the spiritual and mundane concerns and needs of those around us. We are to live our Faith to God’s Good Purposes, emphasis placed on “God’s” on “Good” and “Purposes”. We are to be bright stars shining in the night sky for all those travelling in the night using the stars as navigational aids.

When was the lasts time you purposefully did something motivated by your Christian profession? When you bring you offering to church on Sunday, are you paying the church’s bills or are you participating in God’s purposes in this place, through this place, through this family? When you give money to the Red Cross, or the Salvation Army, or the National Heart Association, or to relief from any of the catastrophes of hurricane or fire or earthquake, are you giving because of the need or because of your Faith? Does your Christian Faith in any way help define what you are doing and why you are doing it? When you bring in some food stuffs for the food bank to be given away, when you give to habitat for the Homeless, or give to any of the programs trying to assist homeless peoples, is it because it a shame people have to live on the street or because God in Jesus has taught us to care for the homeless, the widow and the orphan? It is not a matter of trying to figure out what my Tithe must be, but what I should be doing with what God has blessed me with and what my Faith says should be given or done or…..

What I am suggesting is that it makes a significant difference in understanding why we are doing something. The issue is not so much on what happens to what we give, or the effect of what we are doing; we are not necessarily motivated by results, so much as motivated by our Faith.

I also believe that when we are responding and living out our Faith, there is a greater, blessed, consequence on what we give or do. God blesses and enhances, makes it better, deeper, more consequential. And God blesses the one sincerely living one’s Faith.

The Merchant purchased the Priceless Pearl, but didn’t put that Pearl up on a shelf, or into a box, or into a static collection. Somehow the Merchant used that Pearl to uncover and discover more pearls. The man didn’t get that Treasure hidden in a field in order to hide it under his bed or place it into his safe deposit box. He opened that Treasure Chest and with it made all the difference in the world. Christ didn’t empty Himself of all that was God for no purpose other than for something to do that day. It was done so to serve God’s purposes in this world, each in our own unique and precious way.

And the Kingdom is built, the Kingdom comes, not to my glory but to the Glory of God.

Amen