

Sermon for Sunday, June 4, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"SELLING OUT FOR JESUS"

St. Matthew 13:44-46, Philipians 3:7-14

Text: "...who, on finding one pearl of great value, went out and sold all that he had and bought it." St. Matthew 13:46

Even in the days of Jesus the fields around Jerusalem had already known civilization for many centuries. Towns had sprung up, flourished, then been deserted to crumble back into the ground from which they came. Battles had raged back and forth and the fields had drunk of the blood of the dead and wounded. And through those centuries as the tides and fortunes of ancient peoples rose and fell, many things of value had been hidden away only to have the owner die or for some other reason never recover his treasure. Other things had fallen as people fled enemy soldiers or they had dropped from the hands of exhausted looters. Time and weather and rain and blowing dirt had covered them up. So, because the fields were rich with history, it was not unusual for some shepherd roaming the hills or some plowman tilling the fields to discover some treasure long since forgot. Even today in that land so loaded with the record of centuries, it is not unusual for someone to find some rich treasure buried for countless decades.

Consequently, when Jesus told the little parable of the man finding a treasure in a field and of his selling all that he owned in order to purchase the land, it was an event not unfamiliar to his listeners. Imagine the scene. Here is this farmer out in the fields with his crude, handmade plow, struggling with all of his might to keep the point in the ground as the oxen pull it, struggling under the Judean sun, his bronzed, tan skin gleaming with perspiration as he fights the plow. Suddenly, it strikes something and jumps out of the ground and in frustration he kneels down to see what has knocked his plow out of the ground. And to his amazed delight, he discovered that his plow had unearthed a great treasure. He goes home to his wife and you can imagine the excitement he experiences as he goes in and says to her, "We are selling all we have because I must buy this field." Again, when Jesus told the brief little story of the pearl merchant, the account had a familiar ring to the ears of his listeners. Our own history is filled with accounts in early days when some miner struck a rich lode and even today stories that bring hopes and wishes and dreams to our own hearts are told of get rich events--there are stories of the purchase of speculative stock that soared to record heights, of some lucky miner stumbling on a find of rich ore, of the purchase of a lottery ticket that brought a fortune. So Jesus spoke of a pearl merchant who was searching for fine pearls. Then one day when the fisherman was showing his catch he saw that perfect gem--a pearl so round, so perfectly symeterical, so rich in tone and texture --that he hurried off to turn everything he had into cash in order to raise the purchase price of the fabulous pearl. He was selling out in order to own that pearl of great price.

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like that treasure in the field or like that pearl of great price. I would have you notice in the first place that there was involved the element of discovery. In both places the two men involved recognized the worth of what they had found and in order to possess their find they sold out to own it. That is not always the case with discovery. Some months ago you may remember reading in the paper the story of the man who found an unusual rock in the stream near his home and carried it back to use as a door stop. Some time later a geologist was visiting him and upon seeing the stone examined it closely to find that it was almost pure gold. The man had found the rock, but he had not discovered its worth until the geologist came along.

The same thing can happen in terms of human relationships. For example, my wife has been exclaiming lately how thoughtful and sweet I have become. And really it is true! During past months when she was operated for a malignancy, when she has had to undergo cobalt therapy, and a threat to her life suddenly loomed up, I became aware in a fresh, new way how very much she means to me. In a certain sense I rediscovered her and it has made a wonderful difference in our relationship.

And this can certainly happen also in terms of Jesus Christ. Most of us have heard about Jesus all our lives. Yet, we have not truly discovered Jesus until we make some value judgment about him. Take, for example, Mark Twain. I have just finished reading his autobiography and it ends on a desperate and sad note. You see, Mark Twain was not a Christian and he did not have the same hope we have in life everlasting. His daughter Jean has just died and he brings his life story to a close, "2:30 p.m.--it is the time appointed. The funeral has begun, four hundred miles away, but I can see it all just as if I were there. The scene is the library in the Langdon homestead. Jean's coffin stands where her mother and I stood, forty years ago, and were married; and where Susy's coffin (another daughter) stood thirteen years ago; where her mother's stood five years and a half ago; and where mine will stand, after a little time. Five o'clock--it is all over." Five months latter Mark Twain himself had died of old age, of loneliness, of a broken heart. He had never made the wonderful discovery of a personal relationship to Jesus Christ. He never found that treasure in a field, that pearl of great price.

So, the first element in the little parables that Jesus told about the kingdom of heaven is the element of discovery. The second element is the element of desire. In the case of the plowman, when he made his discovery he desired to own the field in order that the treasure might be his. In the case of the pearl merchant, when he found the perfect gem, he desired it for his very own.

I know many people today who believe in Christianity and in Jesus Christ. In some instances they firmly believe that Christianity is of great value to individuals and to society as a whole, yet they have no personal desire to be a part of the fellowship of believers. I know many people who have loved ones or friends who find a new dynamic, transforming relationship to Jesus. They say, "Well, that is all very nice for you." Let me ask you this morning as bluntly as I know how: First, do you think Jesus is of any value? But secondly, do you desire him for yourself? Is there a hunger and a thirst in your own soul to have a real, a dynamic, a life changing relationship with Jesus?

But this question leads us into the third element of the parable--the element of decision. You see, in both cases the men discovered something they considered to be of great value; in both cases the men greatly desired that which they had discovered. Now came the decisive moment, now came the time for decision--were they willing to pay the price? Yes, the element of decision.

In spite of the fact that they had made a wonderful discovery and in spite of the fact they each desired to own what they had discovered, in neither case could they possess their heart's desire until they made a decision. That decision was this: Were they willing to sell out; was the ownership of the treasure or the pearl; was the ownership of what they desired the most, worth everything?

And isn't that the question you and I face about Jesus Christ? How much are we willing to give up in order to have him? Here is a story from the Bible of a man faced with that decision. He is the rich young ruler. The Bible tells us that he desired to have eternal life and he ran to ask Jesus how he could get it. He had discovered the value of eternal life, he desired it for himself. Now came the

crucial question--what was it worth? What would he give in exchange for his soul? Was he willing to sell out for Jesus? Jesus said to him, "take all you have; sell it and give it to the poor and follow me." Now, that was the price--and a high price it was for a man accustomed to the finer things of life. And his decision? Was he willing to sell out for his soul? The Bible says he went away saddened because he was a man of great wealth. He was not willing to pay the price of eternal life. Here is another story from the Bible with a different ending. It is the story of Peter and Andrew. The Bible tells us how they met Jesus and began to recognize that he was the Messiah. We are told how they listened to him preaching and teaching. So they discovered Jesus for who he was and they desired him for themselves. Then comes the day of decision. Jesus says to them, "Come after me and I will make you to become fishers of men." They stand there looking back at their boats, their nets, the beloved sea, at the cluster of friends working on the boats--there is all they have and own. The Bible says they left all and followed him. They sold out for Jesus. They turned their backs on everything dear and precious in order to follow him. They were willing to pay the price.

Here is another story from the Bible. It is autobiographical. It is St. Paul. He writes, "If any man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...." Do you think he was willing to pay the price? Do you think he sold out for this Jesus?

Let me share briefly with you how this works for a minister. After I had been in my first pastorate in Houston, Texas for almost four years I received a call from a church in Dallas. Frankly, I did not want to go. It simply was not the sort of congregation that I wanted to serve nor was it the kind of ministry that I wanted at that time. Yet, as I prayed about it God told me in no uncertain terms that this was His choice for me in spite of how I felt about it. I realized then that my first loyalty was to Jesus Christ and His will for me. If I was to stay in the ministry, I must be obedient to his will for my life even though it was not what I personally might want. So, I went to Dallas. In later years I can look back and see how God's will was so right. It was out of my experiences in that particular church that I wrote my two books for Elders and Deacons that have now served the denomination for over ten years.

May I be personal for just a moment more? About two years ago I was announcing to my congregation in Lubbock that I was resigning to come here to Central in St. Louis. One of the things I said to them that morning was this, and I quote, "Elizabeth and I have often talked about our ministry here in Lubbock. We have both agreed that nothing would please us more than to spend the rest of our lives right here. We love this church, we love you, and we love this city. We have all a family could desire. Yet, we are not our own. We are His to command and we must be ready to go on an instant's notice. We must, so to speak, travel light! That is the price of discipleship and we gladly and eagerly pay it. We do not know what the future holds, but it does not matter. You see, we trust him who holds the future." Two years latter, we can see how perfect God's plan for us has been. Now Central is our church and we feel so very much at home in St. Louis. We have grown to love you and our work among you. How good our God truly is! In a very real sense, Lubbock is a distant memory. All of our love, all of our interests, all of our concern is here--it belongs to you for we belong to you. We are where God wants us to be and that is enough for us.

Now, it is at this point that so many people get hung up. They are doing things they don't want to stop doing or they are living in a way that they enjoy and they don't want to change. I have had people say something to me like this, "Well, it is okay for you, but I am afraid what God might ask me to do." I had a doctor's wife say to me one day, "I want a vital relationship to Jesus, but I am afraid of what changes he would ask me to make in my life. I'm afraid he might send me some place like Africa as a missionary."

But let me share a portion of our scripture for this morning. In talking about the plowman whose plow struck something that turned out to be a rich treasure, Jesus says of him, "then in his joy--then in his joy--he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." When you sell out for Jesus it is nothing but sheer joy. If we sell out for Jesus, the thing he wants us to do is the very thing that brings us joy. The poet was exactly right when he wrote, "my joy is to do the Master's will." Yes, to do what Jesus wants us to do turns out to be no burden, but a blessing of joy. When we know him, the things we want are the things that he wants. Do you remember how one of our old hymns puts it? "I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold; I'd rather have Jesus than riches untold." Those are the words of a man who had sold out for Jesus Christ.

The earliest Christian art is to be found in the catacombs in Rome where Christians were hiding out for their lives. What sort of art would you expect to find among these people who faced pain, persecution, and death every day? Would you expect it to be sad and somber? Well, it is not. The art is made up of joyous images filled with hope. On the tombs of their dead not a single epitaph contains the word for "grieving." They had sold out for Jesus and were filled with joy. Yes, to discover who Jesus is, to desire him for one's self, and to make a decision for him--that's what life is all about. It is as simple--and as profound--as that. Have you truly made your decision--have you truly sold out for Jesus?