

Sermon for Sunday, May 17, 1981, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"THE UPWARD TUG AND THE DOWNWARD JERK"
St. Matthew 13:44-46, Philippians 3:7-14

Text: "...who, on finding one pearl of great value, went 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 or destroyed 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 valuable items had fallen as people fled enemy soldiers or things fell 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 lost and forgotten. 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 the farmer out in the field with his crude, handmade plow, struggling with all of his might to keep the point in the ground as the oxen pull it. His bronzed skin, tanned by the hot, Judean sun, in gleaming with perspiration as he fights the plow. Suddenly, it strikes something and jumps out of the ground. In frustration he kneels down to see what has caused the problem. To his amazed delight, he discovers that his plow has 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 day is replete with stories of someone suddenly striking it rich--a miner hitting a rich lode, the purchase of a speculative stock that soars to record heights, the purchase of a lottery ticket that brings a fortune. So Jesus spoke of a pearl merchant who was searching for fine pearls. One day when the fishermen were showing their catches, he saw that perfect gem--a pearl so round, so perfectly symmetrical, 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.

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like that treasure in the field or like that pearl of great price. Please notice in the first place that there was involved the element of discovery. In both cases the two men involved discovered something of great value and they recognized that was so. They made a value judgment about what they had found.

Let me ask you a question. Have you discovered Jesus? Notice I didn't ask if you had heard about Jesus or knew about Jesus. No, I asked have you discovered Jesus--have you made a value judgment about Him? You see, a lot of people know about Jesus but have never discovered him. A case in point is Mark Twain. Recently I read his autobiography and it ends on a desperate and sad note. You see, Mark Twain--although he certainly knew about the Bible and about Jesus--was not a Christian. He did not have the same hope in eternal life that Christians have. His daughter Jean has just died and he brings his life story to a close this way: "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 while. Five o'clock--it is all over." Five months later Mark Twain himself had died of old age, of loneliness, of a broken heart. He had known about Jesus, but he had never discovered him as his personal savior. He never found that treasure in the 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 to have it for his very own.

Many of us have discovered Jesus in the sense that we believe in Christianity, we believe in Jesus. Many of us believe that Christianity is of great value to individuals and to society as a whole, yet some have no desire to be a part of the Christian fellowship of believers. I know many people who have a loved one or a friend who found a new dimension, a transforming relationship to Jesus. And they say, "well, that is nice for you but I don't need it." They have made a value judgment about Jesus, but they have no desire for such a personal relationship themselves. Let me ask you as bluntly as I know how! First, do you think Jesus is of any value? And second, 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 to Jesus.

But this leads us to the third element of the parables which is 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 discovered. Now came the decisive moment, now came the time for decision: were they willing to pay the price?

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 hearts' desire until they made a decision. That decision was this: were they willing to sell out--was having what they found worth the cost.

Do you remember the incident of the Rich Young Ruler? He had discovered eternal life. He desired to have it for himself and he ran to Jesus to find out how he could get it. Now came the crucial question: what would it cost and was he willing to pay the price. Jesus told him the price tag on eternal life was high. He told him to take all he had, sell it, and come follow him. Well, the young man was caught between the upward tug of God and the downward jerk of things and God lost.

Isn't that the way it is in life? God tugs at our hearts but the Devil jerks. Has that been your experience? I know it has been mine. So often in my life I have noble desires, good intentions, and I really want to be the kind of person I know God wants me to be. And I know that is God tugging at my heart, calling me, urging me, gently prodding me to be his person. But even though I have discovered the value of being a Christian, and even tho I desire to be God's person, the real question is my own decision. Will I follow the tugging of God or the jerking of the Devil.

Do you have the same experience? St. Paul did. He once wrote, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." He wrote, "...when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand." (Romans 7:19,21) So Paul shares the experience you and I have. But don't let St. Paul kid you. By an act of his will he responded to the tugging of God. In the passage we read from Philippians he told us about it. He said, "but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind the straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Did you catch what he said? He said, "I press on..." God tugs and the Devil jerks, but which way do you go depends on you.

Do you ever catch yourself asking God to make you do something? I do it all the time. I catch myself praying, "God make me a better person. God make me more loving. God make me more spiritual. God make me pray more and study the Bible more." Do you know why I pray for those things? It is because I discovered these are the best qualities in life and I desire them for myself. But do you know why God won't answer a prayer like that? Because he won't make my decisions for me. The very fact that I want those things is God tugging at me. The fact that I don't do them is because the Devil is jerking on me. Whether I acquire those qualities in the final analysis depends on my decision. Yes, God is tugging and the Devil is jerking, but which way I go depends on me.

I suspect there are a lot of us here this morning who are not growing in our Christian commitment. We are not maturing in the Lord. Now, it isn't because we don't want to grow--and God keeps tugging on us to move on in our spiritual growth--but we don't grow because we are not willing to pay the price. I suspect a lot of us are hoping God will take over and make us grow, compell us to grow. But like St. Paul we must press on. We must make the decision. We must pay the price. God will tug and the Devil will jerk but which way we go depends on us.

And I also suspect there are some here this morning who have not really made a commitment, a decision for Jesus. Why not? Could it be we are waiting for some flash from heaven, waiting for God to take control of us and force us? But that will never happen. The decision must be ours. If we decide on Jesus, it will be an act of our wills, a decision of our own.

One of our poets has written, "I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold; I'd rather have Jesus than riches untold." What would you rather have this morning? You see, you can discover Jesus who brings you forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life; you can desire that for yourself. But whether you have them or not depends on you. It's your decision--an act of your will. God will surely tug at your heart and the Devil will certainly jerk, but which way you go depends on you.