

YOU ARE LOVED
Genesis 29: 15-28; Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52
Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time • July 26, 2020
by Pat Berger

We have been told, those of us who have the privilege of speaking in worship now and again, we have been told that we are to have the voices of prophets. One of the commentaries I read said of prophesying that,

A common temptation of religious people who claim to be prophets is to speak at a level of generality that ignores the specificity of context and situation. Christian speakers are too often quick with a general comment, manifesting a vagueness that floats over a situation at a sufficiently uncontroversial and threatening level.

Well, there will **not** be an issue with that here. I intend to be specific, not at all vague, possibly controversial, and probably threatening, as I tell you this: YOU ARE LOVED! You are loved by our God with a love that will not let you go.

You didn't think that was controversial or threatening? Let's think about our verses from Matthew, then, just a bit, and especially the ones about the treasure in the field and about the pearl. What do they tell us about God? After all, these aren't stories about treasures or pearls; these are stories about God, and about God's excellent love for those who are the created. This love that God exhibits for us, that we know as the Kingdom or the realm, this love is so valuable that it is like when someone is plowing and turns up a jar of coins in the field: he buries the jar again, sells everything that he has, and buys that field. He doesn't hold some back, he doesn't put the purchase on his bank card; he sells everything to pay for that field.

The one who was plowing wasn't looking for treasure; he just turned it up with his plow. Remember that in Jesus' time, there weren't banks, and if one had a little extra money and wanted to put it away, it was often the practice to put that money in a clay jar and bury it in the back yard or in a field . . . and sometimes forget exactly where it had been buried. This is the context in which this story would have been heard. Perhaps you didn't know about God's love or God's realm, but when you dug it up or in some other way became aware of it, you found it so valuable that you sold everything you had in order to be a part of the realm. This love is worth selling everything, EVERYTHING that you have!

And this love is so valuable that it is like a merchant who has searched and searched for very fine pearls and finds one; that merchant sells everything that he has, and buys this wonderful pearl. Now, the merchant is different than the one who was plowing; the merchant knows that very fine pearls exist, and has been

searching for them, but the reaction is the very same: when he finds that pearl, he sells everything to purchase the pearl.

One commentator wrote that the parables of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven, also included in this reading, "are twins." Both of them tell the story of something very small and hidden that becomes great. The mustard seed is small although not the smallest seed known even to people in Jesus' time; it was, though, the seed that the rabbis used most often in telling similar stories. When planted, or hidden, in the earth, it could grow to a bush of some size -- depending on the variety, up to about 10 feet tall -- although likely not substantive enough for most birds to build nests. And yeast: small amounts when kneaded into, or hidden in, bread dough, changes the entire loaf. Can we understand how either of these things happen? Well, no; not completely. And they aren't as dramatic as the discovered buried coins or the found pearl; still, they are part of the mystery, part of what makes up and requires our faith, not our understanding. God can start with not-so-much, like disciples who had been fishermen and tax collectors and any one of us, and because of divine love, can bring about the great and glorious Kingdom.

And speaking of twins: in Genesis, we get the next bit of the story of Esau and Jacob, this week again focusing on Jacob. We remember that Jacob had taken Esau's birthright and run off to the country of their mother's family for some safety. On arriving there, one of the first people he saw was Rachel, and the rest, as they say, is history -- although complicated history, of course. Jacob agreed to work for Rachel's father for seven years in order to marry her. At the end of the seven years, Rachel's older sister Leah was not yet married, so father Laban did some trickery of his own. The result was that Jacob arose after his wedding night with Leah at his side rather than Rachel. Oh, said Laban, that's just the way it's done here; one would not allow one's younger daughter to marry before one's older daughter. But -- such a deal -- finish the honeymoon week with Leah, and then work for me for seven more years and we will give you Rachel, too. Somehow, Jacob agreed to that, and the next section of this story, we are not surprised to learn, focuses on Rachel's barrenness and Leah's fruitfulness. Regardless, God's love for the beloved children prevailed; God had promised to go with Jacob wherever he went, and to give him land and an entire nation of descendants and we know that God keeps promises. We will stay tuned.

Back to Jesus and his disciples. After Jesus told that set of parables -- mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure, pearl, and we didn't even get to the net full of fish - - after this, he asked his disciples, "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." That was pretty bold of them, don't you think? Maybe it was one of those situations where the disciples all kind of looked at each other, and thought about how Jesus had been teaching them for all of these chapters and days now, so pulled their shoulders back, held their breath, and with all of the courage that

they could muster said, yes -- hoping against hope that somehow it would turn out to be true. I have done that; maybe you have, too. At least, they were trying to understand. Well, then, they were ready, Jesus said, for their new lives to inform the old. Now they could see how God, this God who loved them no matter what, had been at work in their whole lives.

Now, imagine that you were to fully realize this love that will not let you go. It doesn't matter whether you were looking for it, or just stumbled upon it. What would that require of you? When our parents, in most cases, made baptismal vows and claimed God's promises for us, or when we did that ourselves, what was required? When we come to the Table and partake of bread and wine, **the gifts of God for the people of God**, what is required? Simply, everything. We cannot claim membership in God's realm AND cling to things that work against the growth of that realm.

Justo Gonzalez, in his study of the Gospel of Matthew, wrote, ". . . we have to ask ourselves: What must we leave behind in our quest for God's reign? The point here is not to congratulate ourselves by making a list of those things we have already left behind but rather to survey our present life in order to find what those other things are that we must still abandon." And this might not seem threatening to us? That we are so loved, all of us, by our God, whether we search for that love or stumble upon it, that it is worth our giving up everything?

Sure, it's threatening; and at the same time, it holds so much promise. For this is the God who says to us, as written by Henri Nouwen, "I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me. I am your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your lover and your spouse. . . yes, even your child . . . wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one."

We are loved.

Let us pray.

Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*