

**Sermon Mt. 31-33, 44-52**

**July 26, 2020, New Song Epis. Ch.**

**The Rev. Mel Schlachter**

**Were you surprised to see Vermeer's famous "Girl with the Pearl Earring" in our prelude rather than an icon or an obviously religious painting? Well, I'm here to tell you why I believe it is a religious painting, and how it springs from today's Gospel. You don't know how long I have been waiting for this opportunity!**

**Johannes Vermeer lived in Delft, Holland, in the middle of the 1600's. The Low Countries were the Reformed Church, into which Vermeer was baptized after his birth. Catholics were a semi-hidden minority there, there was a lot of tension between Protestant and Catholic with countries even going to war over religion. But he married a Delft Catholic woman in 1653, the ceremony in a small village outside of Delft. Catherine's mother insisted that Jan be baptized Catholic, which he was and which he accepted. They lived in Mom's big house and he set up a studio on the second floor where he painted most of the works that you and I are familiar with. Next door was a hidden Jesuit church.**

**Back to the Gospel. We have a series of parables, metaphors for the kingdom of heaven. They are very earthy, very mundane. The kingdom is like farming and letting the terrible**

mustard weed grow. God seems to take a shine to birds over crops. Or it is rising, rising mysteriously with the yeast in a hundred loaves of bread meant for a wedding feast. Or like a hidden treasure that a guy finds in someone else's field—making him a thief. Or like a crass old merchant hunting after pearls. Dirt, weeds, bread, fish, treasure hunters—are we mundane enough?

This is not a picture of heavenly triumph in the Roman tradition of conquest, but of obscurity like the play of light in some of Vermeer's paintings. And, you will miss it if you are expecting fireworks and Cecil B. DeMille, because heaven is somehow right here in the ordinary and easily overlooked.

The thief and the merchant with considerable passion sell all that they have in order to claim their treasures. The phrase reminds us of "Sell all that you have and give it to the poor, pick up your cross and come follow me." We usually groan inwardly when we hear those words, here they are exciting. No cross. But the merchant will be dirt poor if he hangs on to his precious pearl. He will have a life of learning how the under half lives, while clutching his pearl. He will have the cross, and the kingdom.

In Vermeer's exegesis of the parable the passion is explicit, with the viewer caught in the act of staring at beauty. The pearl earring connects us to the parable. (Why else a pearl earring??) If we can feel the merchant's passion in Jesus' teaching, we have it front and center with the pearl being on a

woman's ear. I hear the young woman asking the excited viewer, "Well, what do you really want?" which is the very question Jesus puts to us: What do you want with all your heart? What is worth everything you have, all that you are? What is your life's purpose?

For what would you give all that you have? George Floyd would do it for a breath, along with others in recent history whose "I can't breathe" went unheeded. How many of us left place or people at one time or turned them upside down, because figuratively we felt we couldn't breathe there, with them. And of course people are in the streets because we have whole cultures that cannot breathe, pushing limitations, making breathing room.

The magic words here, then, are desire, yearning, passion. The Church has not done well over the centuries with its teachings on desire. Starting off in a culture where anything with the body was third rate or corrupting (sex, food, periods), later adding to that a just suspicion of the desire for power and control, Catholic and Protestant alike have most always been very suspicious of desire. Save for a handful of mystics in every age.

But desire is a baby-and-bathwater thing. If you throw it out where is your passion for God to come from? Your passion for following Christ everywhere our Lord calls you? It is true--our desire will lead us astray a hundred times before our desire compass is pointing to the north star. With any luck along the

way we will only crash and burn in ways that don't kill us or put us in prison or cause too much suffering for others. We don't always have the luck. *From Psalm 119: "I'm overweight and blind inside/ and despite my deep desires for you,/ my heart is often gross with self."*

But without passionate desire, bereft of deep yearning, we are a burned out star, our best hope is living by the book without the love of life and the creative juices of the kingdom.

What is your pearl? And where is your desire? *Psalm 37: Make God, as Lord and master, your delight/ and the desires of your whole heart God will fulfill.*

There is an old Zen story where the neophyte comes to the master and asks, "What must I do for enlightenment?" Whereupon the master takes the young man to the side of a lake, tells him to kneel over the water, and see his face closely in the water. When the man does so the master takes his hand and pushes the guy's head under water and holds it there. After some struggle the young man gets loose and says "Why did you do that?" The master replies, "When you want wisdom as much as you wanted to breathe, you shall have it."

*From Psalm 42: As the deer yearns for the water-brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God. You are the deep desire of my whole being./I long for you with heart and soul./ I yearn to see your face again, my Lord.*