

What is Most Valuable?
First Presbyterian Church
May 7, 2017

Scripture: Jesus is speaking.

Matthew 13: 45-46: “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls; Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.” (KJV)

We pray that God bless the hearing of his Holy Word.

There is a large equestrian statue in my home town of Richmond, Virginia. It honors General Robert E. Lee. The statue itself is 21 feet in height, atop a 60 foot pedestal. Big. The statue is in the middle of a large traffic circle on the appropriately named Monument Avenue. Nearby are monuments to J.E.B. Stuart, Jefferson Davis, Stonewall Jackson, Commodore Matthew Fontaine Maury, and Arthur Ashe, the tennis player. You might be thinking, hmmm, which one of those is unlike the others? But elsewhere in Richmond are many other statues, honoring, among others, Christopher Columbus, George Washington, “Bojangles” Robinson, and yes, even Abraham Lincoln.

These monuments were put in place to memorialize, and hold up as worthy of emulation, those so honored. The statue of Lee was erected in 1890. The people of Virginia were still recovering from the poverty, destruction, and social turmoil following the war. General Lee stood as a hero for his military competence, his caring for his soldiers, his acceptance of the verdict of the battlefield, and his striving to leave the war in the past. He did not participate in the bitter fault-finding. Lee became the President of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia. In his short time there, he revived the institution’s standing, and became an educational innovator. General Lee represented the best from that defeated culture, and was seen as worthy of respect.

I was, and I’ll admit that I remain, attached to that culture. I grew up going to “skirmishes”, shooting matches where men competed in teams representing military units from the War, from both North and South, using muzzle loading rifles and even cannons. My father was in the Thirteenth Confederate Infantry. When I was about five or six, my mother made me a Confederate uniform to wear. On one occasion, I went astray returning to our campsite, and fell into a company of Yankees! They gave me some good-natured teasing. Something like “Looks like we’ve captured a rebel!” Then they kindly sent me on my way. In high school, I was in the Cadet Corps. We marched in parades, such as honoring George Washington’s birthday, and the governor’s inauguration. The color guard carried the American, Confederate, and Virginia flags. I was on the rifle team, and occasionally brought my rifle to school with me. No big deal! During the day, it was kept in the school armory with the other rifles and ammunition. It was a different time and place.

How very different indeed! Recently the Charlottesville city council voted to remove a similar but smaller statue of Lee from its place. There is an effort to do the same in Richmond.

The aim is to eradicate any trace of honor accorded to Lee, or any other hero or symbol, associated with that age and culture. What is next? Rebrand the Washington monument? Do we need to erase the memory of all others who fail to meet the ideals of this present generation?

What we see playing out in this case is not new. In antiquity, when a new dynasty arose, anything remaining of the previous dynasty was often defaced or destroyed. Statues of Pharaoh Akhenaten, the first monotheist known to history, were defaced by the following rulers, who returned to the traditional pantheon. Images of Ramses the Second survive in statues which have been defaced by chipping off the nose. Several years ago, the Taliban made a point of destroying large Buddhist statues in Afghanistan, relics of a culture they held in contempt. The Islamic State has very recently been destroying antiquities in Palmyra.

We seem to live in a winner-take-all world, where leaders that are currently dominant insist that any opposing views be silenced, or at least held in contempt. It is disheartening to be on the wrong end of such a campaign. This is true for things as temporary as the triumphalism of election victors, to things more serious, such as the seemingly anti-Christian drift of the public culture in the United States.

In fact, the identification of heroes or examples to be emulated has declined in general. Today's heroes are mostly entertainment celebrities. When a building or structure, like a sports arena, is named, it is most often given a corporate brand name that is paid for, like renting a billboard. It seems sometimes that our culture, and our country, is headed in the wrong direction.

We can find ourselves under attack personally, as well. Notice how many of the Psalms plea to God for help against evil or mocking adversaries. We read Psalm 3 this morning. Psalm 4 is similar, but more personal. Feeling oneself under attack is a common part of the human condition. It starts in childhood. In the movie, *A Christmas Story*, the narrator, as the grown-up Ralphie, says that, "You were either a bully, a toady, or a victim." Most of us were victims.

I think we all, at some time or other, have found ourselves under attack. What are we to do about it? Is anger justified? Should we fight against the seeming tide of public scorn? How are we to cope? Ah! But we have Easter! That is more important than all the rest.

We, as Christians, can turn for help to the life and words of Jesus. As Easter people, we are believers who rejoice in the love and grace of God, poured out in the life of Jesus Christ. We have been given confidence in the future through his resurrection. We have resources that we can draw on in the face of life's adversity. As David puts it in the 23rd Psalm, "Thou preparest a table before me, in the presence of mine enemies; thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over." So, let us return to the scripture passage for today. Jesus is speaking parables about the Kingdom of God. This time I will read from the RSV.

Matthew 13: 45-46: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." (RSV)

Maybe pearls don't seem like such a big deal now. Just another gemstone. But in antiquity, they were precious indeed! They did not have faceted gemstones back then. Gems had to be cut and polished expertly to be given a pleasing appearance. Yet, pearls were lustrous and beautiful just as they came. Pearls were rare. A beautiful pearl had great value.

Perhaps some of you are also, like me, collectors of "stuff." I admit I'm not a collector of pearls, or other gemstones. Now Cindy, she has a greater appreciation of this parable, just as it is, than I do. Pearls and gems work for her. But I happen to prefer toy trains, not pearls. If you were to come into my house, you would find it also overflowing with books, magazines, games, pictures, knick-knacks, old electronic stuff, and all manner of papers. The elephant in the room is... well, elephants! Two of them. That my grandfather brought back from India. They carry what was once a piano bench, which supports, you guessed it, more stuff! Much should have been tossed away years ago, but, like I said, I collect stuff. I can identify with the merchant of Jesus's parable.

I was recently at the Train Collectors' Association train meet at the York fairgrounds. Cindy and I drive down, and my father and brother drive his R.V. up from Virginia. So, it's also a time to visit and share interest in a hobby. At least, that's how I try to justify it.

Now, attending a train meet requires some strategy. If you spend a bit of money on this locomotive, and that train car, or a semaphore signal, here and there, you can accumulate several items of middling value and interest. They may be useful in running a more entertaining layout, say, a new freight car for Thomas the Tank Engine to pull. Then, you see a magnificent Hornby electric locomotive from about 1938 in excellent condition, that just cries out to you. But your remaining funds are insufficient, because you've expended your money on those other middling pieces. Selling those earlier purchases to raise the capital isn't practical. One can try to obtain a loan, or try to extract funds from elsewhere, say, your spouse. But all those options have what I'll call, "social risks." Better is to hold onto one's money, and avoid the temptations of those lesser purchases, while one searches for a worthy "pearl of great price." Then, later, if having not found that worthy pearl, one can perhaps settle for some of those lesser things.

Jesus's point is, know what's important, and act accordingly. He's pointing to the Kingdom of God. As Christians, that's what we must hold as truly important. Other things are less important. They can't come between us and God. God's love and saving grace redeem us, and ensure our place in that heavenly kingdom. What can equal the value of that? It is God's love poured out for us, in us, and through us, that is important. We can afford to let go of lesser things.

So, as I now consider all of those issues that I spoke of earlier, which can feel so oppressive, how important are they? If others denigrate my heritage, or attack me personally, is that important? Those things are less important than God's love and saving grace in Jesus. I need to be willing to let go of my hurt feelings, my sense of being oppressed, and maybe, yes maybe, even my trains, or other material goods that make life comfortable, if need be, to fulfil my calling by God.

At this point, we need to remember that this parable is an illustrative analogy. The merchant is said to have sold all that he had to buy that pearl. Does that mean he forever after lived in poverty with his precious pearl until he died of starvation? No! That path would take us into a perversion, akin to the “precious” ring of Frodo and Gollum in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Jesus is saying to discard the unimportant for the important, not to make an idol out of a powerless artifact. We are to live normal, useful, and joy-filled lives. We are to be enriched, rather than impoverished, by our finding the precious truth of God’s Kingdom.

One of the blessings we have in the New Testament, is that we not only have in the Gospels the words and life of Jesus. We also have, in the epistles, examples of real people, wrestling with the problems of how to live the life of faith in a complex and difficult world. The apostle Paul was such a man. He was not just a Jew, but a Pharisee, a scholar of the Law. He was a man of high reputation. While not on the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body, perhaps due to his relative youth, he was entrusted by the Sanhedrin to be its agent, to round up and bring back for punishment Christians, seen as heretical Jews, that he might find in Damascus. Surely Paul could expect in time to become one of the leading authorities of his day, respected by his people, secure socially and economically.

We know what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus. Confronted by the risen Christ, Paul gave up what he had been to become a follower of Jesus. Even then, he was not trusted by the early church in Jerusalem, due to his past. But he stayed faithful to his mission, holding onto nothing except the gospel. Listen to how he explains this to the Corinthians:

I Corinthians 9: 19-25: For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the Law I became as one under the law - though I myself am not under the law - that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law - not being without law toward God but am under the law of Christ - that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I may by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I might share in its blessings. (RSV)

Paul no longer needs pride in himself. He has discarded pride in his standing as a Pharisee. He has discarded his sense of being righteous in keeping the Law. He has set aside any ambition for respect by the movers and shakers of his society. He has found his Pearl of Great Price, the treasure that makes all other treasures fade in comparison. He says, “I do it for the sake of the Gospel.”

And, what blessings does Paul look forward to? He explains that, too, later in this letter to the Corinthians. I read from chapter 15, verse 51 and following:

**I Corinthians 15: 51 Behold, I show you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.
52 In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.**

53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

54 So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

55 O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.

57 But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. (KJV)

We are Easter people! Christ is Risen! We have found that Pearl of which Jesus spoke. Our calling is to be true to the gospel, living a life that sheds light to the rest of the world. That doesn't mean we have to become monks. It is alright to retain your jewelry, even your toy trains, if they don't come at the price of giving up that one great treasure we have of God's love and salvation through Jesus Christ. We are blessed by having the Holy Spirit to guide us when we do have to consider difficult decisions. Remember what Jesus said,

John 10:10b: "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." (KJV)

So, we are called to live a life of joy, and of confidence. Yes, the world is full of problems. Perhaps the Holy Spirit will guide each of us in the way to address some of those problems of oppression, injustice, ignorance, poverty, and discouragement, that are so much a part of the modern world. Our calling is to help others, not defend ourselves. God is our defender; we need not fear. As we help others, we carry to them that treasure, that pearl of great price, which can be given freely, and yet also remain in us, strengthened. It is God's world, and we can go forth assured that He will continue to care for it, as he has in the past, and will in the future, even if we cannot now understand how that will be. God calls us to live as Easter People. Rejoice! For He is Risen!

Amen.