

11th Sunday after Pentecost, 2008 (Proper 12A)

Gospel: Matthew 13:44-52

Old Testament: Deuteronomy 7:6-9

Epistle: Romans 8:28-39

Title: Purchased People

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Do you have an investment strategy? Some of you are at or near retirement. The rising price of gas, the declining real estate market, and the current bear market certainly aren't helping things. You may find that you're spending more and saving less and what you do save is declining in value, so you need to have a plan. Many people are willing to give you advice on how to manage your money. There are professional financial planners, there are many newspapers and magazines, and there's always the infomercials that tell you how to make your fortune in real estate, not to mention the televangelists who promise prosperity if you'll only send them your "seed money".

Whatever strategy you use, I would be shocked if you invested your money like the characters in today's parables- the men who sold everything to buy a field or a pearl. In fact, you've probably done the exact opposite. I'm sure you've been told to diversify your holdings. Spread your money around. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Right?

What would you say if someone told you to sell everything you had, and I mean everything- sell your house, sell your car, sell all your furniture, your clothes, your TV, your computer, cash in all your stocks and bonds, your IRAs, your 401(k), your life insurance, and then take all that money and buy one, single pearl. What would you say to that advice? Would you actually do it? Would you be willing to risk it all on one pearl? Even if you got a great deal for that one pearl, and even if you were guaranteed that it would increase in value and improve

your investment, would you do it? Would you risk everything you had for a single precious pearl?

I know I wouldn't. It's just too risky. It just doesn't make sense. But then, the parables are full of things that just don't make sense. Last week it was the farmer who refused to weed his field, because he didn't want to pull up any wheat. The week before there was a farmer who sowed his seed wildly- even on the path and in the rocks and among the thorns. Parables show us the absolute absurdity of God's love for His people. God's love defies our expectations, and it defies reason.

So what do you do with these twin parables, the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price? (There are actually two more parables in today's gospel, but four parables are a bit much for any preacher to cover, let alone a young pastor in his first sermon at his first call. So come back in three years for the other two.) These parables say very much the same thing. Jesus paints two different pictures, but he says basically the same thing twice. The kingdom of heaven is precious, it's priceless, it must be purchased. But what does that mean for you? How do you fit into this picture?

Most often you've probably heard the parable preached this way – Jesus or eternal life is the treasure, Jesus is the pearl, and you are the one looking for Him. Once you find Jesus, you should give up everything for Him. Now that's not completely wrong, Jesus does say things like this at times, about giving up everything to follow him, but there is a better way to hear this parable.

In all the parables we've heard thus far, the Lord has been the one doing all the work. The Lord sows the seed, the Lord plants the field, the Lord casts His nets into the sea. The Lord does everything. On the other hand, we are completely passive. We are the soil that receives the

seed. We are the wheat planted by the Lord. We are the fish caught in the Lord's nets. We receive the actions of the Lord. That's the way things go with the Lord. He is the one at work; He does the whole job. We simply receive what He has to give.

And so it goes with today's parables as well. The Lord is the treasure hunter. The Lord is the merchant searching for pearls. You are the Lord's treasure. You are the Lord's precious pearl. The Lord searches you out and finds you. Once He finds you, He gives everything He has to purchase you. Jesus gives all He has to make you His own. He gives up the glory of heaven to be a humble servant to purchase you. He gives up His very lifeblood to purchase you. As we confess in the catechism, Jesus "has purchased and won me from sin, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious, blood, and with His innocent sufferings and death."

But wait, you might say. I'm nothing special. I just confessed that I'm a dirty, rotten sinner. How could I be His treasure? How could I be His priceless pearl? When the world looks at you, the people of God. They don't see anything special. They see people who are selfish and lazy, liars and cheats, misbehaved children, broken families. When the world looks at Faith, they see a small, aging congregation with an uncertain future. When the world looks at me, they see a young, inexperienced pastor who is in over his head. They see someone who is lacking in charisma, who has wasted years of his life in libraries and classrooms.

But our value is not based on anything that we've done or what others think of us. What determines something's worth? The amount that someone will pay for it. You may think something is utterly worthless, but if someone will pay a fortune for it, that's what it's worth. Our Lord loves you and me so much that He gave everything He had to purchase us. You are a purchased people, precious to the Lord.

This is the message that our world is dying to hear. Children are told they're worthless because they're not old enough, teenagers are told they're worthless because they don't have the right friends and don't fit in. Single people are told they're worthless because they don't have someone special in their lives. People who are unemployed or retired are told they're worthless because they're not "contributing to society." We could go on and on with the poor, the immigrants, the disabled, the unborn, and so many others who are told that they're worthless.

But that's not what the Lord says. The Lord says, you have worth, you have value, you are precious to me. I put my Name on you in Holy Baptism to mark you as my own. I put my words into your ears to forgive your sins. I put my body and blood into you to strengthen and enliven you. If you ever think that you are worthless or unloved- look no further than font, pulpit and altar. There you see how much the Lord loves by the gifts He freely gives you right here.

There's no way to explain why the Lord loves us so much. We certainly don't deserve it. Take a look at the people of Israel. There's no reason why the Lord should have loved and cared for these people the way that He did. There was nothing special or remarkable about them. There are no great pyramids of Jerusalem. There was no Israelite empire. In fact, they were the smallest and weakest of all the peoples on earth. The Israelites were a nation of slaves. The Lord had His pick. He could have chosen the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Babylonians, the Persians, or the Romans. But He chose the people of Israel. Why? Because He loved them. There's no other reason. And there's no way to explain love.

The Lord calls the people of Israel His "treasured possession." The Hebrew term is *segullah*, and refers to a something very precious, very personal that means the world to you. In a society

where so much was held in common, this is what was particularly yours. If your house was on fire and you could only save one thing, that thing would be your *segullah*.

You are the Lord's treasured possession. You are his *segullah*. You are the one thing He has chosen to save in this fallen world. There is nothing that will separate us from His love- not trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword- not life or death or angels or demons or old age or cancer or poverty or inexperience or anything else you can imagine. Nothing will separate you from His love.

You are a treasure hidden in a field. When Jesus found you, He joyfully sold all He had and bought you. You are a fine pearl of great value. When Jesus found you He sold all that He had and bought you. You are a purchased people.