It’s crazy to think that I’ve been in Billings, Montana serving Hope United Methodist Church for over a year now. I remember the spring before we moved to Montana, and how stressful everything felt at that time. My husband and I were newly weds…only a few months married, and we were in the middle of selling our recently purchased house in Denver while buying our new home in Billings. I was stressed with finishing up my ministry as the associate pastor at Applewood Valley and getting ready to become the new solo pastor at Hope. Everything seemed to be out of sorts…I couldn’t tell if I was coming or going most days.

And in an attempt to say my goodbyes to friends in Colorado, I went to coffee with a friend from Denver Seminary. And before I could get even get a word out, she exclaimed “Wow, Angie. I can’t tell you how badly I wish I had your life. You have a husband who supports you and your calling so much that he’s willing to pick up his life and move. You have a beautiful new house in a state that’s so picturesque they film movies up there. You are continuing to grow as a senior leader and a pastor and now you are getting to pastor this amazing new church and start this whole new chapter! You’re living the dream.” It’s interesting when you have moments like that, where something someone says puts everything into perspective. All the things I was complaining about, that were causing me stress were the same things I had prayed for. Because my friend was right…I did have an amazing life and I simply wasn’t recognizing the value of what I had.

We’re going to talk about the things that we value today. What they are, what we’re willing to do to acquire them, and how they change us for the good or the bad.

This morning we are continuing in our fall worship series, “Short Stories from Jesus” where we have been looking at the parables of Jesus through first century Jewish eyes thanks to author, biblical scholar, and orthodox Jew Amy Jill Levine. Many of us have heard Christ’s parables all our lives, but as 21st century American Christians…we’ve usually heard them taught as allegories. And reading them as an allegory reduces these stories to an obvious, over simplified meaning…which would make sense why they usually become so blah and boring to us, right?

Well, today’s parable is no different than the others. The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price has always been explained to me as an allegory on the sacrificial cost of discipleship. From the age of kindergarten all the way to my seminary years, the merchant always symbolized a person who chooses the Kingdom of God and the pearl always symbolized Jesus of the Gospel. And the moral of the story was that we must sacrifice everything to follow Jesus. We should forgo happiness, security, and family when we find Jesus…because He costs us everything.

But this is not how Christ’s first century Jewish audience would have received this parable. They would have unpacked the parable bit by bit…starting with what they knew about merchants and what they knew about pearls. The Greek word used for the man in our story is *emporos*, which means a wholesaler. As author AJ Levine states, “this merchant would have spent his career selling customers things they don’t need at prices they couldn’t afford. And comparing the kingdom to a merchant of any sort would have been a tough sell for Jesus.” Just like yeast had lots of negative connotations to Jews in the first century, so did merchants. The only other place that word *emporos* appears in the New Testament is in the book of Revelation when the merchant weep and mourn for no one buys their goods—gold and silver and slaves. Merchants have a similar meaning in the Septuagint, too. In Genesis 23 the *emporioi* sells Joseph into slavery…they weren’t known as noble, moral people.

And then there’s what the merchant is selling and seeking. What would Jews living at the time of Christ know about fine pearls? Well, in allegorical readings, the pearl is always seen to be the most desirable thing a person could have. According to Roman author, Pliny, pearls were the topmost rank among all things of price…far above even rubies. So it makes sense that so many commentators and pastors have compared this pearl to Jesus or the Gospel as I said earlier.

But if we read a little slower, we will see that the parable doesn’t compare the kingdom of heaven to a pearl. The kingdom of heaven is compared to the merchant who, seeking fine pearls, sells as that he has for one of great value. And that brings us to the merchant’s radical and absurd behavior. This man sold all that he had…everything…. for just one pearl. And if we take Amy Jill Levine’s advice and think hard about what “everything” would have been for this merchant, we realize he would have sold more than just his other jewelry. He would have sold his house, his horse, his wife and his kids… everything to buy that pearl. At this point his actions have transformed his identity…he’s no longer a merchant. He’s now just a guy with a pearl and nothing else.

When the merchant went searching, saw what he wanted, and stopped at nothing to get it. He knew what the most important thing in his life was. What his ultimate concern was…because our ultimate concern is really the pearl of great price.

What to you value more than anything else? That thing you would stop at nothing to acquire? Well, in an episode of the classic 1990’s television show *FRIENDS*, that thing for Chandler Bing is an engagement ring for his girlfriend Monica. Chandler and his friend Phoebe go to the jewelry store to pick out an engagement ring and Chandler finds the perfect one…the greatest ring of all! But right when he’s about to pay for it, he realizes his credit card is back at the apartment so he asks Phoebe to guard the ring for him and stay at the store. Well, Phoebe gets a little distracted with all the other items the store has…like an imitation revolutionary war musket and a diamond tiara…and by the time Chandler comes back asking for the ring, they both realize it’s been sold to another man! Chandler agrees to buy another engagement ring but laments the fact that he missed out on getting the perfect ring for Monica. This is when Phoebe says she thinks she overheard where the man was going to propose with the ring. So the two of them go to the restaurant and get the man’s attention begging him to exchange the ring Chandler bought for the perfect, beloved ring he wanted. And to the surprise of everyone, the man agrees to trade with Chandler causing Chandler to get so emotional he yells at the man’s girlfriend, “You are about to get engaged to the most amazing man! He’s the best!” This is a funny anecdote but it says a lot about the lengths we will go to get what we truly value. So my question for all of us this morning is, what is the most important thing in your life?

The kingdom of heaven is not simply the merchant or the pearl, loved ones… it’s the transformation that comes after that’s so challenging about this parable. It’s the action the merchant took to to stop at nothing until he attained the object of his greatest desire. It was the fact that this merchant knew what he wanted and did whatever he needed to do to get it, realizing it meant prioritizing some things and forgoing other things to achieve his goal. He was laser focused…and that forever changed him, his purpose and his identity. That is the power of the pearl of greatest price. So, I ask you…what is your pearl of greatest price? Is it your family? Your career? Your wealth and possessions? The Gospel?

The first step in discovering our pearl is to take a look at what we’re prioritizing. Because often times the things we’re spending our time on, giving our money towards and obsessively thinking about, is in fact not what’s most important to us. It’s not what’s transforming us into the best disciples we can be for the kingdom of heaven. I know that’s the truth in my own life if I’m really honest. My priorities can get out of whack and I lose focus on what really matters. So, let’s be really courageous and honest with ourselves this morning, by taking inventory of our lives….and see if what we have been prioritizing is making us the very best version of ourselves that we can be. Because that’s what the challenge of this parable is about…and that’s what kingdom is about. It’s becoming our true authentic selves, so that we can live life to the fullest as Jesus intends for us to do. His prayer is that we would bring heaven to earth, advancing the Kingdom as passionate, fulfilled, beloved children of God. But we can’t do that if we’re going after the wrong pearl.

Our muse for this series, scholar Amy Jill Levine, shared that one of her students at Vanderbilt Divinity approached her desk after lecturing on the parable of the pearl one evening. This student confessed that her pearl of great price had been alcohol for many years, and because that drinking was the most important thing in her life she lost all that she had. Her job, her dignity, her marriage all fell a part, she hit rock bottom because she gave up everything good in her life and went after the wrong pearl. And she concluded that when you think about your pearl of great price make sure the pearl—the thing that’s most important in your life—is something that builds up you and your community and is not something that destroys you and others like alcohol, drugs, money, beauty, power, fame.” So when we’re reassessing what we value and what our priorities are, remember that God’s grace is never ending…and Jesus is always inviting us to freedom…to step away from the things that chain us and bind us into new life with him. The right pearl to go after is still out there.

So, thinking back to that conversation I had with my friend when she told me I was living the dream, I am reminded that often times we have what others have been praying for….yearning for and we simply need to be reminded of the truth in our blessings to fully appreciate them… On my toughest days, I allow myself to sit in the hardship and exhaustion of marriage and ministry and I also have gratitude for those pearls because I know I am growing and transforming right where I need to be with those as my priorities. But that conversation with my friend also made me realize that we cannot fully love our neighbor as ourselves if we don’t know what the pearl of great price is for them. So we are not only called to take inventory of our priorities and what we value…but we are invited to help others find their calling and their great purpose. That is part of our journey as Christ followers, too. So, the pearl of great price invites us to be open to the possibility that there is more out there. And this parable challenges us to be brave enough to go after the things we’ve always wanted but never believed we could attain, because life or society or shame convinced us that we were foolish for wanting it. Let us realize this morning that it’s never too late to reprioritize our values, focus on a goal and stop at nothing to achieve it. For there is always more in the kingdom, loved ones. And our God is a God of deep gratitude, abundant hope, passionate dreams. Amen.