

Tolerance for Ambiguity July 26, 2020

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Texts: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Years ago, I was interviewing someone and asked her to tell me about her strengths. At the end of her list, she wryly shared a humble-brag I hadn't heard before. She said, "I like to think I have a high tolerance for ambiguity!" I laughed out loud as I hope some of you are. "Hired," I thought to myself. The phrase wasn't original to her but that didn't matter. She was telling me she had an open mind, a willingness to hold and weigh various competing and even conflicting perspectives. It told me that she could maintain poise and patience when the way forward was unclear or uncertain. Clearly, a wonderful trait for any job.

After the last few months, I'd like to think that many of our tolerances for ambiguity have been stretched! How could they not? Yes, there's the almost unbearable amount of loss...of loved ones and strangers alike, of jobs, of mobility, of human connections, of hugs, of celebrations and rituals, of singing and in-person worship and gathering. And on top of that, we are having to live with an almost unbearable amount of uncertainty about the future. With this challenge comes a host of often competing ideas about how we should act and live and go about our daily activities. Decisions we used to take for granted about travel, dining, seeing family members or going back to school. Should we, or shouldn't we? It's often yes to both! Or consider how we are responding to the recent reckoning around racial justice. Should we join another book group about race or are yet more book groups for white folks a part of the problem? Again, I say, yes to both especially if reading is all we are doing. All the while, we don't and can't yet know what's coming next. Next week. In September. In November. Beyond. May God help us all. Still I have to wonder. What is God wanting us to learn from all this seemingly relentless exposure to ambiguity and uncertainty? What, if anything, might our increasingly high tolerances for ambiguity be preparing us for? I'll come back to this but first let's go to our text from Matthew 13.

We just heard a string of parables - mustard seed, leaven, buried treasure, pearls, dragnets and more all crammed in! We know they are all about what kingdom of God is like but otherwise, they are highly ambiguous in meaning. Good thing we've had some practice lately! Remember: the parables aren't intended to have clear take aways. Instead, they are offered to perplex, to disturb and disrupt our usual ways of thinking and so to keep us coming back, returning to a wide range of possible interpretation. They invite us to wonder. They expand our moral and spiritual imaginations, so we can better embrace divine mystery and God's infinite love for us, and we can learn to live and act accordingly. Jesus's rabbinic pedagogy intentionally stretches and grows our tolerance for ambiguity, so we can be all the more ready to break from the status quo of our earthly kingdoms and enter the deeper life of God's kingdom which is ever closer than we think.

For today, let's take a jeweler's lens and focus in on the pearl of great price. Matthew 13: 44: "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." Seems easy enough, right? You've got this. The merchant is a disciple and the pearl is Jesus, right? Or... is the merchant Jesus and the pearl is the kingdom. Or... is the pearl of great price you or me, sandy sinners that we are, ready to be all pearled and polished up, whenever we are found! And, we haven't even considered all the commodification that seems to be going on here. I mean, if we sell all we've got, and buy the pearl of great value, aren't we saying that we can buy Jesus, or the gospel, or kingdom? See what I mean when I say that parables

perplex. Hmm. Maybe the parable is about our needs to sacrifice what we have to follow Jesus, the so called ‘cost of discipleship?’ Maybe, but if so, remember that merchant’s not giving all he has to the poor, he’s just trading it in to buy something else that he wants, and it doesn’t tell us what he does with it. Maybe even he doesn’t yet where it will lead him? Or, is the parable about a search for some deeper and more precious knowledge of God? Are you confused yet? Good! Because I think that’s right where Jesus wants us, our openness to ambiguity flung wide as can be. We may see grains of truth in what we’ve explored so far but we know we need to keep working with it.

Some first century context may help here, and for this I’m indebted to the biblical scholar, Amy Jill Levine, and her wonderful book on the parables, “Short Stories by Jesus.” First, it helps to know that merchants were not held in high esteem in first century Palestine. It might be like Jesus telling us a parable about a used car salesman. Not the most appealing of characters for a parable about God’s realm. Yet, if we read carefully, we can see that by the end of the story, the merchant essentially tags out of his business. Did you catch that? Some would call him reckless. If he keeps the great pearl, how will he live? The parable isn’t clear. Others might say he is being countercultural, defining his treasure on his own terms, and doing what it takes to obtain it. Either way, he is no longer a merchant. He redefines himself and his identity. Now we may be getting somewhere. Who is he? He’s a new man. He’s now the guy that knows he possesses something of great, even for him ultimate, value! What’s more, if the “pearl” is something beyond all the other fine pearls, maybe it too has become something different, no longer a literal pearl but a symbol for his ultimate concern, for what he holds most precious in life. This can change the way we look at all those fine pearls he has been chasing! No more business as usual. All those other pearls be they gems or money, the right schools, the right job, the right neighborhood, the perfect family, all of those things he’s been trading in, fine as they may be, still left him with an unshakable feeling that he was missing something. Did he need to divest himself of all of it, to make room for something of even deeper and more lasting value? What if the parable is about finding the courage to change - to break from the status quo, to stop our worldly business as usual, to change our lives, to give up our old identities for the sake of something new, even when we aren’t sure what that new thing is or where it will lead us?

Levine shares a story of studying this passage in a group of seminary students and inmates at a local prison. Go figure that it was in dialogue there, with a community at the margins, that clarity emerged. She paraphrased what one of the students shared: “I never expected to find myself here, but when the grad school offer came, I did what I needed to do to accept. I gave up my home. I divorced my husband who discouraged my dreams. I took out loans. I took back my name. I do not know what will happen at the end of this program but that doesn’t matter. I’m doing what’s right for me. I have my pearl.” Talk about courage to change. The next person to speak was an inmate who offered a single word. Freedom. Freedom was his pearl. He would do what it takes - confession to rather than denial of his crime, anger management and so on in order increase his chances for parole. When and if it happened, he intends to break the cycle of crime and incarceration. With his sentenced flattened or pardon granted, he is no longer the “insider” or the “criminal” but the “free man” who needs to form his own identity. A next said his pearl was “safety.” These are all examples of people coming to find their ultimate concern.

This all leads me to wonder, what if the merchant himself is modeling a high tolerance for ambiguity related to the consequences of his decisions! I’d say there’s at least an invitation here to leave behind our status quo identities and to embrace a new sense of who we are and how we are called to live. I wonder ...what is that pearl, what is that key, for each of us, that will unlock the way to a still deeper life and to your truest self? And what do we need to divest ourselves from to obtain it? See what I mean about parables disrupting and disturbing us.

Years after that interview on my office, I learned that ambiguity tolerance and intolerance is, in fact, a psychological construct that’s been around for decades. It’s even got its own Wikipedia page. It was

developed by scholars soon after World War II. By the early 60's, "tolerance of ambiguity" was defined as "the tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as opportunities, or even as 'desirable.'" Meanwhile, an "intolerance for ambiguity" was seen as "the tendency to perceive (i.e. interpret) ambiguous and uncertain situations as sources of threat." Tools and quizzes have been developed since to measure one's tolerance levels. Studies came to show that those who were intolerant of ambiguity had a strong need for categorization and certainty, a preference for the familiar, an inability to allow good and bad traits to co-exist in the same person. But wait there's more. From another list of characteristics used to describe individuals intolerant to ambiguity are words like: Authoritarian. Dogmatic. Rigid. Closed minded. Ethnically prejudiced. Extra-punitive. Aggressive. Is this calling anyone to mind? The research in part led cultural critic Theodore Adorno to say, "Intolerance of ambiguity is the mark of an authoritarian personality." Our President is clearly showing these signs, yet increasingly so is our national culture. Consider this tall order - the more intentional we can be about embracing ambiguity and uncertainty, the more we can learn to live with a multiplicity of different perspectives, to prefer the unfamiliar, the more we can practice both/and thinking, the more apt will be to resist authoritarian tendencies, including those that may creep up in our lives and settings.

One more story before I close. Father Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest and founder Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, today the largest gang intervention, rehab and re-entry program on the planet. Over the 30 years, he's buried more than 200 young human beings he knows and loves who were killed because of gang violence. And they were killed by people he also knows and loves. In *Barking to the Choir: the Power of Radical Kinship*, he shares what he's learned about his pearl:

"Kinship is the game changer. [Kinship] is the pearl of great price. It is the treasure buried in the field. Let's sell everything to get it. We think kinship is beyond our reach – yet Gospel kinship always exposes the game, jostles the status quo, in constant need of conversion, because the status quo is only interested in incessant judgment, comparisons, measuring, scapegoating, and competition..." He backs these words up later in the book when he writes: "Moral outrage is the opposite of God; it only divides and separates what God wants for us, which is to be united in kinship. Moral outrage doesn't lead us to solutions—it keeps us from them. It keeps us from moving toward a fuller, more compassionate response to members of our community who belong to us, no matter what they've done."

Boyle is talking about moral outrage towards so-called hardened criminals, not towards sitting politicians and yet the same can be said. What if we, here at First Church, need to let go of the status quo of our morally outraged selves! What if we are being asked let go of every ounce of our righteousness certainty about our causes and who we think are, let go our virtue signaling, divest ourselves from all those fine pearls of our educations and whatever else, and have the courage to grab onto a deeper identity and lay claim to our pearls of great price, even before we know where it will lead us? What would those pearls be?

Is it a sense of radical kin-ship that we need? Is it to do whatever it takes to share our lives and our bank accounts with our neighbors and communities of color as if they were our family, as if their kids were our kids? What self-images do we need to relinquish? What privilege and pride of place do we need to divest ourselves from? No longer merchants, no longer those predictable mostly white progressive congregation from Cambridge with their same-old social justice playbook. No longer the status quo. What else would we be? What else could we be? I don't entirely know yet but neither did the merchant and that's the point. I do know that our window of tolerance and our window of opportunity has never been greater than right now! And I believe we are beginning to discover that pearl, and with it a new identity as individuals and as a church. I see it in the deep learning and love we are sharing in proximity with our homeless neighbors at the Friday Cafe and our shelter that have teamed up to serve 500 meals a week since Covid began. I see it in as we are starting to understand and repent of how white supremacy exists in our history and in the very fibers of this institution's being! I

see it in the growing relationships with persons and communities of colors where we are willing to show up and listen and be led. I see it in our ongoing ways of caring for each other and connecting with each other across generations.

Indeed, the kingdom and kin-ship of God is near! Like a mustard. Like leaven in bread. Like finding a pearl of great price and grabbing it with no idea what comes next! May it be so for us and may the current ambiguities and uncertainties lead us ever more to trust in the ways of our ever living, ever-loving God.

Please pray with me. In the coming days, God continue to open our windows of tolerance and opportunity! Make ever more clear what is our pearl of great value. Continue to entrust it to us. Polish it with your love and tenderness and care and justice. Give us the courage to leave our old ways behind, to change and act accordingly, especially when there are many right paths we can take, and we don't know what comes next. Amen.