

The Pearl of Great Price (Parables 3)
Matthew 13:45-46 & Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
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First Presbyterian, Luling

I've never been to see the Taj Mahal in India, nor is it likely that I ever will. Can you picture it in your mind? A huge—enormous—white marble building with a dome and minaret towers, in the midst of a garden. It's a tomb, built by Shah Jahan for his favorite wife after she died in childbirth. I don't know how many other wives there were, but it is obvious by the scale and magnificence of the building that he loved her very much. He was later buried there himself. Depending on what outbuildings and grounds you include, it was finished in the year 1643, at a cost of almost 896 million dollars in today's money. It takes up 42 acres and includes materials from all over India, China, Tibet, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Arabia, all transported by elephants. This would be quite a feat today, much less in the 1600s. I'm sure some of Shah Jahan's contemporaries shook their heads and tut-tutted under their breaths, at how much money he was spending and how much work he was requiring of his subjects, just to mourn his favorite wife. It seemed foolish at the time, though today it's considered one of the seven wonders of the world.¹

Some of you may know my friend Bette Burris. She's retired now, but was the pastor at Goliad Presbyterian Church. I met Bette when I visited Austin Seminary as a prospective student in 1996. She would have been in her mid-fifties, and she had beautiful white hair. I was 22 years old, only had a few gray hairs, and I thought she was very old to be considering seminary. We both began our seminary coursework that next fall. She was already a lay pastor, an elder leading her church, preaching every Sunday and serving communion. She felt called to go to seminary, though, to learn more, so that she could lead her congregation better. Seminary, well really any higher education, is expensive. She was 60 years old when we graduated, the oldest in our class and I was the youngest. Bette served her church for another 15 years, which is longer than some of our classmates stuck it out in a church. We've been colleagues and friends ever since we first met, and I couldn't be happier that she was part of our class. She had real, on-the-job training, real church experience, and she shared it judiciously and generously. I imagine though, that I wasn't the only person thinking "she's a little old to be starting seminary." How foolish. What a poor

¹ Information in this paragraph is from the "Taj Mahal" entry on Wikipedia.org

return on such a large investment of time and money and effort, to only be able to serve a few years before retirement.

When we lived in Flatonia, I worked for a few months as a substitute teacher. Long enough to appreciate substitutes. Most of the time, they called me to be an extra aide in the special education department in the elementary building. There were two students in the special ed room, full time. They both had extensive medical needs. Neither could speak. Neither could eat solid food. One was legally blind and the other wore glasses and hearing aids. Every day in that classroom was much like the day before. In the time I was there, neither of them had any sort of breakthrough or discernible progress. They played with the same toys on the trays of their wheelchairs. If we forgot to pay attention, one of them would play the same song on the same toy over and over and over. But there they were in school. And the special ed teacher valiantly tried to teach them things. She would sing them the ABCs. She would wheel them to the lunchroom so they could be around their peers. She would read them stories and show them the pictures. I was guilty of thinking, "why is she bothering? This is a waste of time. These boys are not ever going to learn anything. They will never be able to contribute to society. This is foolishness, to use time and energy to try to educate these two students."

The prophet Jeremiah was from a little town called Anathoth. But he got called by God to prophesy to God's people. And the things he had to say were not very uplifting or hopeful. He went around all the time warning of impending doom and the destruction of the nation because of its faithlessness. He also got called by God to do some things in public that were supposed to be symbolic of the nation's destruction. Like not get married or have children (chapter 16), break a potter's vessel on purpose (chapter 19) and go around wearing a yoke, like oxen (chapter 28). Jeremiah has been doom and gloom in the short term and only spoke about hope in the very long term. His next symbolic action that God instructs him to do, though, is full of hope. He buys a field in his hometown of Anathoth, from his cousin. It's a declaration that the land is a gift from God that will never ultimately fail. It's a declaration of hope. It's also exceedingly foolish. He knows, because he also believes what God has told him about the destruction of the country, that he will likely never get to live on this piece of land, that it will likely fall into enemy hands, that he is not going to be settling down there with the wife and kids and building a life. He buries the deed, so that those who will be restored to the land, generations in the future, will find it and know that God has been faithful. It's like buying the oceanfront property in Arizona that George Strait

sings about. It's completely ridiculous and foolish and makes no sense. Except that God told him to do it.

All of this foolishness brings us to the merchant. Or the guy formerly known as a merchant. Because he goes on a quest for fine pearls. And then he finds one, the perfect and expensive pearl, and he sells everything he has—not just his merchandise, but his household goods and property—and buys it. So he's no longer a merchant. He's just a guy with a really great pearl and nothing else. Foolishness. Utter and complete foolishness, inexplicable to anyone else. And we would write off his story as foolishness, except that Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like this guy. How can that be?

Amy-Jill Levine, the author of the book we're studying, makes a number of observations about this parable that is only two verses long. First, merchants weren't really understood to be upstanding citizens. They don't appear often in the Bible, but when they do, it's with an unsavory connotation. So we have a guy that isn't admirable in the first place doing something incredibly foolish, and we're supposed to find the kingdom of heaven there.

She also observes that pearls weren't famous or especially known in the Bible. They're only mentioned once, and she says that's just a strange translation of a word that is usually translated as a more generic "jewels." Pearls don't seem to have been on the same level as diamonds or rubies or gold. So we have an unadmirable guy searching after things that aren't necessarily especially valuable or desirable. And the kingdom of heaven is somewhere here.

And then we have him selling everything so that he can buy this pearl.

It looks like pure foolishness from the outside. But so did Jeremiah buying that field in Anathoth. And so did that special ed teacher trying to teach those two boys. And so did Bette Burris enrolling at seminary. And so did Shah Jahan building an enormous tomb for his wife. It all seemed like foolishness, especially at the time. But each of those people, in their own way, felt like it was something they had to do, something they felt compelled to do, something they had no choice about, something they were called to do.

Maybe that merchant felt the same. It didn't matter how foolish it looked from the outside, it was something he had to do. Maybe that's what Jesus is telling us the kingdom of heaven is like—something that sure seems like pure foolishness, especially from the outside looking in and especially without the benefit of hindsight.

The Apostle Paul says much the same thing in First Corinthians: "The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us are

being saved it is the power of God.” (1:18). And then, “The world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.” (1:21).

It is foolishness, really. We worship and follow a person who was executed by the Roman Empire, a failure by worldly measures. We worship and follow a man who told us to sell all that we have and give it to the poor, which is not exactly what this merchant did, but he’s closer than the rest of us. We worship and follow a man who told us to love our enemies. We worship and follow a man who told us to let someone slap us on the other side of our face after we’ve already been hit on the first side. This is foolishness, when you stop and think about it. Especially from the outside looking in and especially without the benefit of hindsight.

We know that the cross was not the last word, that what looked like defeat was made a victory in the resurrection. And we know that Jesus didn’t call us to do easy things, but hard things. And we know that worldly wisdom can only get us so far, and often just gets us in a mess. And we turn to Jesus’s kind of foolishness for another kind of wisdom.

And then there’s these things that the church does that seem pretty foolish, too. We give up a Sunday morning, a time when other people sleep in, read the newspaper, go out for brunch, catch up on work or household chores, or...well I have no idea what other people do on Sunday mornings, but those are my guesses. We ask for money every week. That is not very attractive. Then we give that money away, which seems silly, when there’s so much we could use it for ourselves. And we try to teach Bible stories to children and adults. We sometimes ask people to memorize things, as if they don’t have a phone in their pocket where they could just look it up. We sing old songs. We work really hard to perpetuate an institution that has made a lot of mistakes and hurt a lot of people over the centuries. I imagine, from the outside looking in and without the perspective of time, almost everything we do as the church looks pretty foolish.

But we believe that in this foolishness is the kingdom of heaven. We believe that the one we worship and follow was wise in a way that the world can never be. We believe a unbelievable story about resurrection, and we’re foolish enough to hold onto that hope for ourselves. We don’t know what that merchant was going to do with that pearl, but we understand his impulse to do something that appears to be foolish, in the name of being faithful.