

## *What's It Worth to You?*

Genesis 29: 15-28    Matthew 13: 44-46

Returning over 30 years after my last employment in a bank, it's clear that security has been much improved. Cameras are everywhere in high resolution color as bulletproof glass separates tellers from the lobby. Neither of those features was around at the savings and loan where I worked in 1985. GPS trackers and range sensitive dye packs were also unheard of. It's very rare for someone to get away with a bank robbery. It hardly seems worth it unless you're looking to get arrested and sent to prison.

If Danny Simpson had known more about guns in 1990, he might not have needed to rob the bank. But in 1990, in Ottawa, Canada, this 24-year-old went to jail ... and his gun went to a museum. Danny was arrested for robbing a bank of \$6,000 and then sent to jail for six years. He had used a .45 caliber Colt semi-automatic, which turned out to be an antique made by the Ross Rifle Company, Quebec City, in 1918. The pistol is worth up to \$100,000—much more than Danny Simpson had stolen. If he had just known what he carried in his hand, maybe he wouldn't have robbed the bank. I'm sure Danny discovered in hindsight that robbing the bank wasn't worth it for more than the obvious reason.

Another 'is it worth it' question may have come up when you were confronted with making a commitment to your spouse. A few of you may have wondered. We know that because we knew your spouse. You probably asked yourself, 'is this person worth it?' Am I going to commit myself wholeheartedly to this person for the rest of my life? That could be a daunting question, well worth considering for a while. It isn't worth considering in retrospect; it's too late now.

You could hear that question of whether or not it's worth it in our scriptures.

Jacob's brother Esau had been heard weighing the possibility of murdering Jacob once old man Isaac kicks the bucket. Mama Rebekah sent her favored twin son Jacob on a fast holiday to Uncle Laban's place over in Paddan Aram. Ma told Jacob to find himself a wife over there with Uncle Laban.

Today's scripture shows that scoundrels and rascals like Jacob are endemic to this family, or maybe even genetic into the extended family. Jacob meets his Uncle Laban and makes the mistake of believing that this guy is on the up-and-up. No, man – he's family. That doesn't bode well for starters, knowing how this family operates.

Laban offers to compensate young Jacob for his work around the place. Having met Laban's daughter Rachel when he first arrived, we now learn that there are two daughters: Leah the older one who has "delicate" eyes, and Rachel who scripture describes as "lovely in form and beautiful" – a long way of saying that Rachel was **hot** and Leah was not. Leah might have been nice and attractive, but Leah was no Rachel. See the bulletin cover and see if you can figure out which one is which daughter.

Jacob is no dummy. He knows how much a choice wife might cost, because there was a certain value to be covered with Uncle Laban to gain his permission. Knowing this, he pledges to work for seven years for Rachel, a generous value. Laban agrees to the terms – ‘better to you, Jacob, in the family, than to some stranger who ain’t one of us.’

Jacob does his seven years of work and the text says those years seemed like just a few days because of his love for Rachel. Awww.

When Jacob claims his wife, she is apparently quite covered up for the wedding, and there is presumably a fair amount of drinking and celebrating, and at night the marriage is consummated. But the next morning, like coming off a bad drunk, Jacob wakes up to discover a surprise in his bed. “Leah! What are **you** doing here?” And then it clicks. “LABAN!!”

Again, Uncle Laban was part of this extended and highly-dysfunctional-backstabbing-bunch-of-weasels family. Laban informs Jacob that it would violate the rights of the firstborn to allow Rachel to be wedded before Leah, the firstborn. Oh, no – there it is – *primogeniture* only here in female terms. Jacob has just been burned!

Here Jacob has come to the question, ‘Is this worth it?’ Uncle Laban promises Rachel to him after the bridal week is over – 7 days. Then he can wed Rachel, **but** only in exchange for **another** 7 years of labor to Uncle Laban. Another seven years. Is Leah starting to look pretty good right now? But Leah is no Rachel. Rachel is still smoking in Jacob’s lovelorn eyes. Leah? Sorry, she isn’t Rachel. Seven more years with Uncle. But seven years with Uncle *with* Rachel. He does the deal, gets the hottie, and seven years more labor to seal the deal.

The story focuses on the devotion of Jacob to his heart-throb, Rachel. He loves Rachel and will do almost anything to have her as his wife. Okay, in the end, as **one** of his wives. Spoiler alert: the wife-adding isn’t over, by the way. Life gets complicated.

We’re also inwardly delighted to see Jacob, the rascal, get scammed by his Uncle, and pleased to see primogeniture raise its ugly head to him and deliver some payback.

The real challenge for people of faith is the question: What’s it worth to you?

In this story, love is the powerful motivation and the critical valuation. Love didn’t have a price. Love didn’t measure appreciation, depreciation, return on investment, P-E ratio, or any other value measurement. Love was off the scale of what was wise, appropriate, acceptable, standard, or modest. It’s Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate* going to the chapel when it appears he has lost his love, and throwing himself against the glass, as he screams in agony and urgency, “Elaine!” What’s it worth to you?

That’s the question as we consider the recognition of inestimable value in the short parables in Matthew:

*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*

*Again, 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.*

This continues a collection of parables that Matthew has assembled in some particular order, the reason for which remains a mystery to us, known only to Matthew. I guess Matthew figured, ‘this is the place where Jesus teaches in parables,’ and he throws them all together in haphazard order from what we can tell.

The subject of these parables gets stated in the beginning once again, like others in prior weeks: *The kingdom of heaven is like...* The parables are not random stories about aspects of life; remember, they’re specifically about the Kingdom of God.

The notion of treasure hidden in the field would not have been unusual. Banks were hardly considered safe places – there was no FDIC, remember. The home could always be robbed. Burying one’s treasure in the field was a common practice and pretty secure, too. However, it sometimes happened that the one who buries the wealth suddenly dies, and no one knows that the treasure even exists.

The implicit context which the ancient listener would quickly recognize is that there is a common field worker laboring in a field for the current owner. (Owners aren’t working the field.) This lowly worker comes upon the stash of a former owner that was securely buried and represents a colossal fortune. Of course, the new owner is unaware of the treasure in the field.

We might be tempted to be dingbats here, so let’s do a dingbat check. The dingbat hears this story and questions how the worker has failed to tell the current owner about the treasure, and instead surreptitiously (or lying to the owner, by omission) buys the field without disclosing the field’s greater value. The dingbat says, “I have problems with the ethics in the parable.” And what do we tell dingbats? Stop being such a dingbat! The parable isn’t about ethics. If you want ethics, go find a parable about ethics. This is about values and commitment and devotion. It’s about what you do when something of great value becomes present to you.

The worker in the field is the most unlikely buyer of that property. Not only would such a worker in the field not have anywhere near enough money himself, he would have to borrow from everyone he knew (and maybe pay a visit or two to the local loan sharks) in order to raise the cash to buy the field, and in the end may even sell *himself* into possible debt to gain this field. What is implicit in the context is the **extraordinary** lengths that a field worker would have to go to make this purchase.

We hear in the parable that the worker was overcome with joy. Joy in this life-changing discovery impelled him to go far beyond his capabilities, his resources, even his social standing, to embrace the transformation that could be his. But he would have to be committed in a way he had never been committed before, not for anything else.

With this parable, Jesus challenges his audience on the question of how much they value the Kingdom of God. Are they willing to be committed to the Kingdom in the same way that they would be committed to treasure in the field? They should be.

In the parable of the precious pearl, the context is a bit different. We have a merchant in active pursuit of fine pearls. This individual was accustomed to seeing high value items, fine pearls from far corners of the globe. But even this wary merchant, who would likely have claimed to have seen anything worth seeing, who would have derided claims about treasures discovered, even he gets set back on his heels by this uniquely precious pearl. In all of his years of looking at pearls, nothing could compare to this pearl. The pearl merchant made a good living and had assets he could convert to purchase this pearl. But wait – isn't there a value point where it's a bit nutty, to sell everything you have in order to acquire a pearl? You can't eat the pearl, or pay the rent, or retire on a pearl. In the end, it's wondrous object, but it has scant practical value, right?

The point of the parable is that this practical matter is irrelevant. The precious pearl is what makes life worth living for this merchant. To pass it up would be to yield his life for stupid junk and mindless futility. He has **no** life *unless* he possesses the precious pearl; his life becomes incomparable when he does possess it.

These parables present the challenge to us, to give witness to the kingdom of heaven by our unrivalled devotion. The kingdom is like this story of a guy going into hock to buy a field with a fabulous treasure. The kingdom is like a pearl merchant who finds the most precious pearl and gives up everything to possess it. These witnesses in the parables recognize the impossible blessing before them and surrender everything else of value in order to secure that blessing for themselves. Perhaps these characters in the parables are even *more* deeply committed than Jacob in his love for Rachel. At the very least, they're on a par with Jacob, uncompromising for the object of their desire.

We're challenged this morning to consider our own lives, and our own choices, to ask if we have made the Kingdom investment with our own lives. May we ask whether we possess the treasure of treasures, the pearl of inestimable value, the transforming blessing of the Savior who makes all things new and possible for those faithfully committed, fully in love with Jesus and passionate for his Kingdom way of new life for all.