

[*Pawn Stars* video]

We love shows like *Pawn Stars* or *American Pickers* or *Storage Wars*. We love to find value in the mist of garbage. The magic of these shows is that the treasure is buried in the midst of our everyday world. Locked away in storage lockers or attics or basements or maybe even sitting out in the open, being passed every day, ignored and overlooked, are these valuable secrets.

Pawn Stars works because you and me – us regular people - don't know how to value our world well. The show reveals a truth we already know: most people don't know what they have. Take the guy in the video – he had a gold bar (which most of us would know is pretty valuable). But he didn't know the first thing about gold bars. He didn't know how to tell this was more than just a gold bar. It's a 15th century sunken pirate treasure gold bar! It's worth *at least double* what it seems to be worth, to the right collector.

That's not the end of the world when we're talking about antiques. It's not even the worst tragedy if that guy had only sold his gold bar for a measly \$24,000 instead of \$48. But if it can be true about a chair or a piece of jewelry or a piece of pirate treasure, couldn't the same be true of our families, our vocations, our faith? We live in a world of routines, of plans, of calendars and smartphones. Mostly we go from day to day the same way we move through our possessions: they're automatic, ordinary.

That's why shows like *Pawn Stars* stir our imaginations: for a handful of minutes our ordinary worlds are transformed into rooms full of buried treasure. Suddenly, we're surrounded by secrets waiting to be revealed. At the end of the episode, we return to our ordinary, everyday lives, to our plain homes and normal possessions and wonder: what treasures lie here? What am I overlooking, walking past every day?

Is it possible that I'm ignoring a priceless treasure right in front of me?

Of course initially we're thrilled by the prospect of more money - who isn't? But the magic of these silly shows runs deeper than that, touches something deep in our souls that knows our world is magical, that there's more to life than just what's happening in the ordinary, everyday world.

These stories make us dream of an expert who could come into our ordinary world and reveal something extraordinary, something priceless. And if it could be true of our possessions, what of us?

Could it be that somewhere, in the middle of our ordinary lives something extraordinary waits for us?

The good news is that our instinct is right on: that sense you have that there's more to life than the everyday grind is accurate. There's a life waiting just beyond the life you're living, life overflowing with beauty and power and possibility.

That life is yours for the taking. It's here and available for you and the good news is that all it will cost you is everything.

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Let me be crystal clear: there is a life waiting for you, hidden in the midst of the life you're living right now. And it's incomparably better, so much so that it makes the life you're living right now look... well, not much like real life. This hidden life is yours for the taking. All for the low, low price of everything you have... the whole of the life you're living right now.

Quite the sales pitch, isn't it?

That claim strikes us as absurd. Who would pay such a high price for anything? Especially for religion. Because let's get real: you're at church, I'm a pastor and this is a sermon. We're talking about Jesus today. And in our culture, religion belongs in our private sphere.

You know what I mean, right? In our culture, we've divided life into public and private spheres. The public sphere deals with things we all do together: education, government, sports, commerce, our jobs. The private sphere is what belongs to just me: health, family (including parenting, marriage, etc), dating, buying and keeping a home, and - according to us, religion.

Our culture values religion. We all love spirituality. But only if it stays behind closed doors. Religion is something you and your family do in the privacy of your own home. But when you come out in public, whether you're on the soccer fields with your kids or in the voting booth, at a PTA meeting or at work, you keep your religion to yourself.

To employ a crude example, we think of choosing to follow Jesus in the same way we might consider putting a new dishwasher in our kitchen. We do a sort of cost-benefits analysis: which dishwasher is the best? Do we really *need* a dishwasher? Well, it's going to make our lives easier overall. Save some time here that we can then invest over there, so we choose a model and go with it. And the best appliances sort of disappear. They allow our lives to function more smoothly. They don't require too much upkeep (which means they don't demand our attention).

That's how we like our religion. We hear it's good, that it promotes stability in the home and mental wellbeing. We have all those studies about how religious people tend to be happier and live longer, so we shop around. Find one we like - most of us here in America choose some brand of Christianity because it's the most popular. We install it in our lives and we like it best when it requires little upkeep. We check in a few times a month, maybe participate in a service project occasionally. Our kids like it, our spouses like it (or at least tolerate it), and we meet some pretty cool people. Good enough, we think.

That's why the claim that Jesus' new life, this excessive, overflowing life that is truly life, this new thing God is doing - to claim that will cost us everything strikes us as foolish. Because if religion is an additive to our lives, something we attach to make the rest of our life better, it makes no sense to sacrifice that life for Jesus.

If religion is like an additive, an appliance, it's not worth our whole lives. No matter how awesome that dishwasher is, you'd never sell your whole house to buy it. A dishwasher is totally useless without a kitchen, without plumbing. Without electricity. The whole point of a dishwasher is to make the whole kitchen better. So to scrap the kitchen for the dishwasher doesn't make any sense.

So too, if the point of following Jesus is to make the life we're already living better, then to abandon that life for the sake of following Jesus is silly.

And yet that's exactly what Jesus will claim in our parable today. Could it be possible that the problem isn't with Jesus, but with our picture of religion, our dream of what that excessive, abundant life actually looks like? Could there be a religion that doesn't just improve the life we're living, but teaches us the path to a whole new life?

Turn with me to Matthew 13. If you grabbed one of our Bibles on the way in, it's on page XXXX. If you don't own a Bible, we'd be honored if you'd consider that Bible a gift from us and take it with you. This summer we've been exploring these stories Jesus told. They're short, provocative stories Jesus uses to invite us to consider more carefully the character and nature of God's new life.

Parables, in other words, are meant to help us slow down a bit. Let's read today's parable, beginning in verse 45:

Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls. When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it! -- Matthew 13:45-46

Jesus tells us a story of a merchant on the lookout for "choice pearls". This guy is just like the Pawn Stars: he's trained to discern between trash and treasure. Pearls - like any fine gem - come in varying quality. And someone like me, who knows nothing about pearls, couldn't reliably distinguish between a pearl and a marble. But this guy has learned the difference between a pretty nice pearl and a great pearl.

And now, in his travels, moving from city to city, buying and selling pearls, he finds that pearl: the one he'd been searching for all his life. The pearl he wasn't even sure existed: a pearl so pure and beautiful and good that it's worth literally everything.

That sounds a little foolish to us, but it would've made some sense to his original audience, who was more familiar with the pearl diving industry.

My friend Matt Mikalatos has recently been taking some of Jesus' stories and imagining how they'd sound if Jesus were telling them today. He reimagines our pearl merchant as a guy named Roland, who peruses flea markets looking for good deals. Here's how the story goes:

Can you imagine finding that treasure that was unquestionably worth your entire life? No haggling, no wondering, no comparing prices. You just know intimately and immediately that what you've found is worth everything.

The pearl merchant knew right away because he'd cultivated an understanding of what made a pearl valuable. I could look at five pearls all next to each other and have not the slightest clue what was valuable and what wasn't. But not this merchant.

Same with our friend Roland. If you didn't know who Jerry Siegel was, or know enough about comics to recognize the cover of Action Comics #1 (or even know what that is), you could leaf right past those pages. But to a trained eye, they're priceless.

To our untrained eyes, Jesus' insistence that his new life costs us our old lives might sound foolish. As foolish as a man selling his life for a little round ball of pearl. Or as silly as a guy divesting himself of all his assets for a few pictures drawn by a long-dead teenager.

We hear Jesus' offer and think, who would sell their house for a new dishwasher?

But Jesus comes to us as a pearl merchant. As a comic book expert. As a teacher offering us a new kind of religion: not an appliance, an additive that makes our lives a little better. But as a whole new kind of life.

A religion that can't be constrained to the private sphere of our lives, a little something for the weekend that gets us through our weeks. A religion that doesn't just improve our ordinary lives a little, make them a little more tolerable, manageable or more convenient, but a whole new life. A different way to live in the world.

Not a new dishwasher in an old kitchen, but a whole new house, a whole new neighborhood, a whole new world. It's safe to say that Jesus didn't come to update our religion, or to give us a new religion to replace whatever we were doing before. Jesus came to give us a whole new life. One that transforms how we live in public, too.

Following Jesus transforms how we work, how we vote, how we parent (at home and on the soccer field), how we are married, how we date, how we are alone. The life Jesus offers us costs us everything.

As he says later in Matthew:

If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. -- Matthew 16:25

The new life Jesus offers us is so much better, so much bigger than the life we lived before that "everything" is a small price to pay. When we encounter God and are transformed, when we realize the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can't believe the deal we're getting.

This is why those who follow Jesus can't help but brag about Jesus. When you're able to discern the difference between a life without Jesus and a life of following Jesus, it's a no-brainer. You're just like that pearl merchant. Just like Roland. You say to God, Wait, I get *this*, and all it costs me is everything?! You've got a deal!

We're all investing our lives in something. We've all been given life: a tremendous gift. We all have talents, abilities, energies, passions. And we're giving them to something. Maybe it's a 401-K. Maybe it's to a relationship. To a cause or passion. Maybe you're giving your life to your kids (or to what you want for your kids).

What is getting your best? At the end of the day, where did you spend your energies, your time, your love?

The Kingdom of God is here. It's all around you, waiting like a priceless pearl. If you recognize it, you'll invest everything you have in it. It'll cost you everything. But it's worth far more than you can possibly imagine.

You'll tell everyone you know that it cost you your life and it's easily worth twice the price. It cost you everything and you got the deal of a lifetime.

Communion SetUp

We're closing today with the communion meal as an opportunity to respond to Jesus' invitation. As in every area of our lives, even accepting this new reality that costs us everything is a choice we make to follow Jesus.

Jesus gave up everything to make this new life available to us. In this meal we share together, we remember and celebrate his faithfulness to us. Even when we settle for cheap imitation religion, when we reduce the God of the universe to an appliance we hope makes our broken lives a little better, Jesus gave himself up to be broken for us.

When we eat this little gluten-free wafer, we remember Jesus' body broken for us. When we dip it in the juice, we remember Jesus' blood poured out to connect us to God, to open that whole new life up for us.

Approaching the communion table is our way of saying Yes to Jesus' new life. It's our way to offer everything up to the God who has given up everything to offer us new life. It costs us everything we have, and we're getting an incredible deal.

Prayer