

Fridfeldt, a young new assistant pastor arrives on a cold winter evening and sits down with his senior pastor. Throughout dinner, Fridfeldt sensed a lack of what he would consider good Christian piety from the senior pastor, and decides he needs to let his senior know where he is coming from and what kind of pious assistant he will be.

"I just want you to know from the beginning, sir, that I am a believer," he said. His voice was a bit harsh. He saw a gleam in the old man's eyes which he could not quite interpret. Was approval indicated, or did he have something up his sleeve?

The rector put the lamp back on the table, puffed at his pipe, and looked at the young man a moment before he spoke. "So you are a believer, I'm glad to hear that. What do you believe in?"

Fridfeldt stared dumbfounded at his superior. Was he jesting with him? "But, sir, I am simply saying that I am a believer."

"Yes, I hear that, my boy. But what is it that you believe in?"

Fridfeldt was almost speechless. "But don't you know, sir, what it means to be a believer?"

"That is a word which can stand for things that differ greatly, my boy. I ask only what it is that you believe in."

"In Jesus, of course," answered Fridfeldt, raising his voice. "I mean—I mean that I have given him my heart."

The older man's face became suddenly as solemn as the grave. "Do you consider *that* something to give him?"

By this time, Fridfeldt was almost in tears. "But sir, if you do not give your heart to Jesus, you cannot be saved."

"You are right, my boy. And it is just as true that, if you think you are saved because you give Jesus your heart, you will not be saved. You see, my boy," he continued reassuringly, as he continued to look at the young pastor's face, in which uncertainty and resentment were shown in a struggle for the upper hand, "it is *one thing* to choose Jesus as one's Lord and Savior, to give him one's heart and commit oneself to him, and that he now accepts one into his little flock; it is a very different thing to believe on him as a Redeemer of sinners, of whom one is chief. One does not choose a Redeemer for oneself, you understand, nor give one's heart to him. The heart is a rusty old can on a junk heap. A fine birthday gift, indeed! But a wonderful Lord passes by, and has mercy on the wretched tin can, sticks his walking cane through it, and rescues it from the junk pile and takes it home with him. That is how it is."

Giertz, Bo. Hammer of God

(pp. 146-147) Fortress Press

The novella continues on to other things. But this is the conversation that has stuck with me most out of the entire book by the Swedish Lutheran theologian, Bo Giertz. And it came to mind again as I was reading the parables appointed for us for today.

Over the past couple of weeks, we have heard other parables from Jesus. And we have had the benefit of Jesus explaining them. So, we could easily move on into application of them. But now today we have the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value. Possibly, largely because we have no explanation from Jesus, we often tend to see ourselves in this parable. And that's not wrong. But the problem we often have is much like Fridfeldt's problem. We see ourselves in the wrong position.

There are basically two interpretations of these parables. First, and commonly accepted, is that heaven is the great treasure or the pearl of great price. Or perhaps it is Jesus Himself...or His Word. When we look at the parables in this light, we see a moral to the story. We must give up all for the sake of Jesus, for the sake of His Word, for the sake of His kingdom. We must let go of earthly things that get in the way, that stand in between us and Him.

That's not necessarily wrong. Jesus talks elsewhere about gouging out an eye, cutting off a hand, leaving family behind, taking up a cross to follow Him. In Matthew 19, Jesus tells a rich young man who is seeking the kingdom by works to sell everything to follow Him. And because Jesus gives no

explanation for these two parables, it's easy for us to take it as a moralism, a lesson in holy living. We must seek the Kingdom of Heaven. We must sell everything to get it. We must give up our old lives. Again, that's not necessarily wrong...to a certain point.

Many people who take this approach will often talk about how much of a Christian they are, yet turn around and make saving faith, forgiveness, and salvation into something they have to do in order to be saved. How many times have you heard someone say that they decided to be saved, that they remember the moment when they decided to seek Jesus out and accept Him, or the exact time they first prayed the "Sinner's Prayer?" They, like Pastor Fridfeldt in the novella, have "given" their hearts to Jesus. Their statements and their view of salvation comes from the perspective of creation, not from the perspective of the Creator.

God is very clear in telling us exactly how we stand before Him from His perspective. **"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."** **"Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive."** **"The venom of asps is under their lips."** **"Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."** **"Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known."** **"There is no fear of God before their eyes."** *Romans 3:10-18* The apostle Paul quotes from several places in the OT as he writes this in Romans 3. We have sought after God? We have given Him our heart? A fine birthday gift, indeed!

So, what *are* we to make of these two parables when Jesus gives no explanation for them? Well, actually He does. Each of them begins with these words, **"The kingdom of heaven is like."** When any particular parable starts in this way, it is *not* primarily about how *we behave*; rather, it is how *God behaves through the rule and reign of His Son Jesus Christ*.

The same is true for us as it was for Israel of Old. **"You are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers."**

Not because they (or we) were more in number. Indeed, not because of any quality in themselves or ourselves. Not because of anything they or we had done. But because of what God had done, what He had promised to do, and what He has done for them and us in Jesus Christ.

God did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all. *Romans 8:32* His Son did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant. *Philippians 2:6-7* Jesus Christ saw us rusty old cans on the trash heap of His fallen creation and came alongside us and redeemed us, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with His own precious blood. *1 Peter 1:18-19* Jesus Christ gave up all that He had, even His Father's protection to redeem you and me...not because of anything we have earned, not because we gave Him our hearts, but because He gave us His, because this is how the kingdom of heaven, the active rule and reign of Jesus Christ behaves.

In expounding the 2nd article of the Apostles' Creed, Luther puts it this way: that [Jesus Christ] *"has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to Him, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true."*

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, you are the pearl of great price. You have been purchased by the Son of God and redeemed. And how do you and I know that this is true? Because God did not abandon Him to the grave, but raised Him up on the third day, proving that the price He paid was sufficient. I know we are well out of the Easter season, but it's worth saying again. Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed Alleluia! And because Christ is risen, we are risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.