



Have you ever had one of those life-changing experiences, one of those mountaintop experiences where you suddenly become aware of God in a new way, and you are never the same afterwards? In 2005, I had one of those mountaintop experiences in my life where my whole understanding of myself and God changed.

It was 2005, I was invited by the University of Edinburgh to give a lecture on civil society and theology. I thought, as a young academic, that I had hit the payload. I was so excited. I was so thrilled. The University of Edinburgh, world-class European university. And so I told, uh, my parents. My parents said, "We'll come and, uh, go with you." And so then I said, "Well, can I bring Claire and the girls?" They said, "Yes, let's do this. We're all gonna do this, actually." And so we, we all got hotel rooms in Edinburgh, and I went and I gave my, my lecture, and it was eventually published in a book. I finished it, and I had this amazing, beautiful letdown.

I kind of heard those words of the old song by Peggy Lee, *Is That All There Is?* As I was going through that kind of letdown, I decided to go back to what I did a lot in those days. I ran. I used to run about eight miles every other day. It was for stress management and for exercise. And so I went for this long run in Edinburgh, and this was, of course, before you could readily get a map on your phone.

I got a bit lost and, and I had to ask for directions a couple of times. One woman had never seen a runner before. I remember, her saying to me, "Carl, you're sweating." What's the rush? Do you need a ride? I came to the edge of Edinburgh right by the Scottish Parliament, and I saw this incredible hill outside of the city, this dormant volcano that I learned later on was called Arthur's Seat.

I saw these paths that went up the volcano, and I decided even though I was a couple of miles into my run, that I was gonna run up that mountain. So I began running, and when I began to get tired, I shifted my thinking a little bit. Instead of thinking about getting to the top of the mountain, I focused on the incredible sunlight that was there that day.

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It was the first day that the sun had come out, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. And I said to myself, like, "Let's let the sun be a kind of force of gravity." And wouldn't you know, in that moment my, my, my step become a bit lighter, and I was able to somehow... I was just moving up it, and I was being drawn higher and higher, and I got to the top, and I looked out, and I could see the whole city, and it was beautiful.

And then I began to do this descent, and there was this clearing right just off the descent, this clearing where there were benches, and there was this young woman with long red hair that she had done up into large Rastafarian braids, and she was weeping. It was just the two of us there in that moment, and I stopped running. Staying at a distance, I said to her I'm an Episcopal priest, which is an Anglican priest "Can I listen to you? Is there something I can do to help?" And she said, surprisingly, "Yes." So I went and I sat down on the bench across from her, and she poured out all of her frustrations.

She had moved to Edinburgh with a group of friends. They had rented a suite. They had a couple of, of rooms there. They were all sharing. And of course, when young people get together and they get their jobs for the first time in a city, there was all sorts of minor betrayals, and then there was romance, and then there was breakups, and then her friends lost their jobs, and they left her with the rent, and she couldn't afford it. And she knew she was gonna have to call her mother, and her mother was gonna have to shake her head and say she was right, and that she would have to return to her little home with her tail between her legs, having discovered just how inadequate she was to adult in that way.

When she finished speaking, I said to her, "Thank you. It means a great deal to me that you shared that with me." And I said, "May I share with you something?" And she said, "Sure." And instead of going into some kind of rote answer, I pulled upon this insight I had from today's gospel in Matthew that I discovered in the midst of spiritual direction.

I said, "You know, in the gospel, it says that the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, having found the one pearl of great price, sells everything he has and purchases it."

For my entire life, I've always thought that that was about the work of discipleship. To be worthy of the kingdom of Jesus is to set aside everything, to sell all that we have, and to choose Jesus as that pearl of great price. But I realize now that I

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have been reading it wrongly. The truth of this parable is that I am the pearl of great price, and Jesus is the merchant who has given up everything for me.

I believe you are the pearl of great price. Think for a moment how pearls are made. Pearls are made when oysters experience a wound. A bit of sand comes in and wounds the animal, and the organism does its best to somehow defend itself. It puts layer upon layer upon layer of secretions on that wound, on that sand. As it builds up, it suddenly becomes luminescent. That's how pearls are made. And you are, I said to her, the pearl of great price. Jesus loves you. God loves you. And what you've experienced is a bit of sand. You've experienced a wound in your life, and you will somehow get through that wound by knowing that you are beloved.

There will be a time when you'll look at pictures of yourself with your red hair all done up in a Rastafarian hairdo. You will look back on that, and you'll smile, and you'll say to yourself, "I did that. I did that." And you'll look back on this time as an adventure in your life, I promise you. But remember, you are a pearl.

She said, "That's one of the most beautiful things I've heard." And I knew then, right at that moment, I had to leave that conversation as soon as fast I could. Why? Because I probably would've offered advice. I would've said, "Maybe I have a friend in Glasgow that can help you get a job." I could do all sorts of things to talk about maybe getting some psychotherapy.

I knew that if I had said another word, I would've ruined that moment. So I explained to her that I better keep moving because I needed to keep warm and not have my muscles get cold. I ran down that mountain, and that experience changed my life. It changed my life because I realized, in the retrospect, I realized that everything I was trying to do as an academic was building something that wasn't for me.

I was a popular professor. I was the kind of professor where students would sit in my office and both avoid writing their papers, and have a different kind of session of learning. You know, the teaching that happens in the hallways and the offices is so much more important than the teaching that happens in the classroom and the lecture halls. But I had never had that kind of talk with a young person, and that beautiful, transformative sharing was what became precious to me. It became my pearl and as I moved through my life, I suddenly decided to spend more of my time trying to create those kinds of experiences with God with others.

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Now why do I share this with you? I want to do three things today in this sermon. I wanna offer a window into today's gospel from Matthew. I also want to speak a little bit about the way and the why of ministry, particularly ministry to young people. And the third thing I want to do is I want to invite you to go into this kind of pilgrimage that I'm going to describe.

So beginning first with the window. When I say that the center of this parable is that the Kingdom of God is as if a merchant, an emporos is the Greek, in search of fine pearls. Margaritas is the Greek for pearls, not the refreshing summer drink And finding one pearl, a margariton of great value, he went out and sold all that he had bought. Everything Jesus is building through his parables can be borrowed-- can be boiled down to that one, that one line, that one parable, that pocket parable in the middle. Jesus is speaking about the Kingdom of Heaven, and he's using the language of parable to get there, and that can be frustrating to his disciples. Earlier on in Matthew thirteen, they ask him, "Why do you speak in terms of parables?" And Jesus gives the beautiful non-answer, "To you have been given the mysteries, the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven." What did he mean? I think he was speaking about the whole nature of how a parable works as the kind of mortar of kingdom building.

The Greek for parable is parabolon, which is to throw alongside, to create a comparison. But standing behind that Greek is a Hebrew word, mashal. The word mashal in Hebrew can mean any kind of analogy or allegory or poetry or song, and it's used to describe the deepest meaning in our experience with God. To only understand a piece of scripture as a written literal way is to miss, is to miss the deeper meaning in the scripture. The mashal is meant to expand your mind, to expand your heart, to expand your consciousness. Interestingly, mashal is also the same exact word for rule. A good ruler rules through mashal. By understanding the whole, by getting at the whole in a way that is powerful and real and moves person to person. The rule of God, the Kingdom of God is not then, by this reading, so much about a command, so much as it's about a consciousness.

All throughout the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus is talking about using parables to speak about the kingdom, He steps away from all the ways kingdoms are built. In chapter 12, He gets into a fight with the Pharisees because they criticize His disciples for working on the Sabbath. Jesus said that God does not desire sacrifices but mercy. And by that, He meant to say that the Kingdom of God is not gonna be built by some kind of reassertion of religious authority. It's not gonna be built from some kind of ritual observance that gonna, that's gonna get it right when years we've gotten it wrong And then earlier on, right before the beginning of chapter 13, Jesus is

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confronted by his own flesh and blood. His mother and his brothers and sisters come to see him, and Jesus says, "No, I will not see them." They're expecting some kind of VIP moment. He says, "No, my brothers and sisters are those who do the will of God." And in that way, Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is not gonna be built through some kind of dynasty. Right after the chapter we read today, just at the end, Jesus enters his hometown and he is rejected. He is told, that he has no authority because isn't this just the carpenter's son? The Kingdom of God is not gonna be built through territory. It's not gonna begin with the locale and spread out. No. The Kingdom of God is gonna be built when these parables enter our consciousness and move from person to person and reach our communities and societies. It's about consciousness, not about commands.

So when Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who having found one, sells all that he has and buys it, this is an invitation for us to read through and see the deeper message Jesus is giving in that moment. It's not about giving up everything and taking on the pearl, because the pearl of Jesus cannot be bought. Jesus cannot be bought and sold. Jesus is not the pearl in that verse. Jesus is seen in the merchant, the *emporos*, who is searching for pearls. The word *emporos* means merchant or seafarer. It's a status, the status of it was very low. But by saying *emporos*, the word for *emporos* is to be on a journey. It's *en poros*, to be on a journey. Jesus is on a journey, and he has given up everything so that he could have us, you, me, as the pearl of great price.

All of the parables we have in Matthew, all of the way he's building the kingdom, is an invitation to a transformed consciousness. It's an invitation to conversion. It's an invitation to being changed. It's an invitation to relationship. It's an invitation to love. That's the window that I experienced on that mountain in Scotland. I gave the best teaching I knew at the moment to that young person, and in the process, I was changed.

Let me speak now about the way and the why of youth ministry. All of what we're trying to do when we bring kids to far off places and put them to work building is to create the conditions in which they will experience a powerful experience of God. More than anything else, we don't wanna transfer religious knowledge. We don't want to transfer any kind of skills that they can learn. It's lovely that we did construction. My hope is no one in that youth group has to do construction the rest of their lives. The purpose of all that work is to experience a powerful experience of God. We had that in this beautiful church that we served on the first Sunday, and many of us for the rest of the week. We were at the Iglesia Episcopal de La Reconciliación, and there was a

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beautiful padre there. His name was Padre Alirio, and Alirio could speak wonderful German. He could speak wonderful Spanish. He could speak wonderful Italian. He hardly spoke English but the young people just drew to him. He was so powerful. He was so full of love. And he sent us out on a bit of a prayer walk in his parish. He had prepared people to receive visitors who would pray, and we went through, and we had these amazing moments, and the first moment we visited, a young person in our group, Cecil, stepped forward when someone unloaded this incredibly difficult pastoral need, suffering from cancer, I believe. And Cecil came and held her hands and prayed for her spontaneously, powerfully, and then when the next person asked for prayer, he said, "Gunner, it's your turn." And Gunner, who was much less talkative than Cecil, stepped forward and did his part, and then they all took turns praying, and Kellie was astonished by watching them pray and seeing them. And I told her that at the end of the day, it was her who taught them how to pray. They were just modeling the prayer that Kellie did with them every day throughout their time.

It was amazing. It was powerful. It was a moment more than anything else, more than the work we did, that filled me with deep joy and deep love and deep pride. And Padre Alirio and I have become friends. I follow him on Facebook, and he posts regularly. And yesterday, he had the following post, which I think opens up everything I am trying to show you today about the way and the why of youth ministry. He wrote this, "More and more people driven by a certain nostalgia for God feel the need to seek something different, a new way of believing in Him. How to seek God? How do we seek God? Undoubtedly, each of us must start from our own experience. There is no need to copy others. There is no need to force or pretend. Each of us knows our own desires and miseries, our emptiness and our fears. Each of us knows our need for God.

God's voice never ceases. God does not shout with his lips, but whispers to the heart. That is why it is precisely not enough to seek God from the outside in books, discussions, or debate. It is one thing to discuss religion and another very different thing to seek God with a sincere heart. Seeking God requires work, but finding God is never the result of tireless effort or rigid ritualism and self-denial. God is a gift, and what matters is to receive God with what I like to call soul simplicity. Once we leave childhood, we must suffer much to return to it, as only after a long night does the dawn return. Ask yourself, 'What shall I do to become a child again?'"

For Alirio, the experience of God is major, and it pivots much like we find in today's gospel to realizing that we are the pearl of great price that Jesus has come an infinite distance to claim and love and hold. And the final thing I want to invite you to

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today is to go on your own journey to make this moment the beginning of your pilgrimage.

Pilgrimages are powerful, and next year we will be going to Scotland. We're gonna have an opportunity for you as adults to accompany those of us who are youth. The youth will stay in hostels. The adults will stay in hotels. I will be staying with the youth. I will be regretting my choice but my job is to be there, to witness to the experience of God that they experience, to delight in the ways that people open their eyes, to the ways they discover themselves as pearls. We're going to Scotland, which is maybe a little bit on point for today's sermon. Once I shared this story that I shared with you today, and a parishioner sent me this picture that's on the bulletin. It was done by Tom Smith. It was beautiful work. He had climbed Arthur's Seat himself, and he found that spot right before I hit the top. And he saw it when he was there, this beautiful rainbow appeared, and he snapped this photo.

No, this photo is not AI. It's not been photoshopped. It was done on a non-digital format. It was done on actual film. And for those of you who are young today, ask others what that means. It was in a completely authentic moment given for him. What is your pilgrimage? What will that pilgrimage look like? Every pilgrimage brings you to liminal spaces where heaven and earth come together. When you are challenged right to the edge of your abilities, and you suddenly find yourself able to go with the flow of God. Pilgrimages begin when we ask ourselves, no matter where we are, "Where is God inviting me to go?" Where is God inviting you to go? Remember that you are God's pearl. Remember the infinite distance that God has traveled to be with you. Pray with me as we find thin places and look for God hidden in our midst. May we share the words of Rainer Maria Rilke, who writes, "God forgive me, but this is what I need to say. May what I do flow from me like a river, no forcing and no holding back, the way it is with children."

Amen.