

Proper 12, Year A
Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52
July 27, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

Surprise Encounters:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

A man going about his business—buying and selling pearls. There on the table, maybe buried under a pile of ordinary pearls, is a pearl of such great value that he sells his entire stock just to have it.

A worker tilling a field uncovers a great treasure. His heart almost stops. He's never come across anything like it. Quickly he reburies it. He sells all he has. Maybe he even borrows from friends so he can return and purchase the field he's worked and have the treasure he's found.

I imagine we've all had such moments—moments when we've encountered a pearl of great value or stumbled across a treasure and buried it in the field of our heart. I imagine we've all had times in our lives when we've encountered something so special, so precious, so unusual that even time can't totally erase the impact of the encounter. I imagine that we've all experienced a time when the extraordinary enters into the ordinary and changes everything.

So often folks expect the extraordinary to come in the midst of the ordinary, but that's not how it is. At least that's not how I've experienced the extraordinary in my life, and I'll wager that's not how it's been in your life either. Trumpets don't blare, lights don't flash, there's not a column of honor guards surrounding the advent of the extraordinary. Instead you round a corner, and there it is—something amazing, something life-changing in the midst of your daily routine or something holy right there in the grittiness and griminess of life.

A baby's cry, a child's question, a life-partner's deep need prompts you to respond immediately from the core of your being. Maybe suddenly you remember words from a psalm or a line of scripture and your understanding of a situation shifts. Or you're chopping onions or boning chicken breasts or snipping chives and you gain fresh insight into a person who has made you mad or left you stumped, and you begin to see them as a beloved child of God.

It's like that. Suddenly grace bursts into life and a window opens on the workings of God. Suddenly, you're aware that you're standing in the presence of God.

The peace of God, the grace of God, the reign of God, is like that. You stumble on it—or it stumbles on you. Either way you've got a pearl of great value. Either way it changes your life. Maybe not all at once. Maybe not dramatically. Maybe only a little bit. Maybe only a shift in perspective, but there's a shift nonetheless.

Shifts like that, encounters with the divine, leave you hungry for more. Nothing's quite the same after a brush with the holy. You're different. Perhaps you begin by seeing things differently—seeing glimpses of God in the landscape of your daily life—the people you meet, the things you do almost without thinking, the places that are part of the backdrop of your life. Sometimes brushes with the holy inspire in folks a most amazing response—bit by bit they begin to let go of that which possesses them—old hurts, long-tendered resentments, unreflective ways of living.

As I think back on that sunset walk on Ocean Beach, what strikes me as most amazing was the way that everyone on that beach was caught in the same moment. All fell silent. All paused and made way for the Holy. And, I like to believe, all offered a quiet prayer of thanks—thanks for the reign of God bursting into the moment.

A pearl of great value, a treasure buried in a field, the extraordinary right there in midst of the ordinary, the reign of God coming near—not in the distant future, not at the end of time but right now, in this moment, to us as individuals, to us—the part of the Body of Christ we call Trinity, and to the people of God wherever they may be. Let us open our eyes and our hearts to the pearl before our eyes, to the Holy in our midst, for there is where the reign of God is to be found. Thanks be to God.