

Pentecost 28A  
Peace, Seattle  
November 19, 2017  
Isaiah 43:1-7, Matt 13:33, 44, 45

## **AUTHENTIC TREASURE**

The featured painting at Christie’s auction house last Wednesday, reputed to be a long-lost portrait of Jesus by Leonardo da Vinci named “Salvador Mundi,” had an opening bid of \$100 million dollars. But by the time the gavel came down, that figure had risen to over 4½ times that amount, making the purchase, at \$450.3 million dollars, the highest price ever paid at auction for a work of art.<sup>1</sup>

### **Who the buyer is, no one yet knows.**

What makes the story even more intriguing is that six years before its arrival on the world art scene as a long-lost “Leonardo” in 2011, the painting was sold at an estate sale for \$10,000.

Speculation is rife about whether such an enormous investment, perhaps on the part of an established museum, could prove to be the kind of blockbuster attraction—like Leonardo’s Mona Lisa—that entices a constant stream of paying patrons from around the world.

### **But IS it a Leonardo—and how can we know for certain?**

“Although some serious scholars believe the painting can be attributed to the Renaissance master”—they point to material evidence, the brushwork, the way the artist plays with clarity and focus—“the restoration was so thoroughgoing that it might be safer to say: There is possibly some Leonardo in there.”<sup>2</sup>

In the mind of one prominent critic, “the astonishing amount paid for this work proves [at least this much]: that with a handful of artists, Leonardo preeminent among them, any amount of authenticity is sufficient for marketers, salesmen and audiences who crave sacred objects.”<sup>3</sup>

The 13th chapter of Matthew is chockfull of parables told by Jesus, and three of those parables serve as windows for us this morning, inviting us to imagine what God’s reign is like.

- The reign of God is like yeast mixed in with flour.
- The reign of God is like a priceless treasure hidden in a field.
- The reign of God is like a merchant searching for fine pearls.

### **There’s a visceral quality to these parables.**

**In the first** we can picture—can we not—a strong Bakerwoman God bending over a great heap of dough mixed with leaven; turning it out, then punching it down and kneading it as flour flies up and about; turning the dough over and over with her “divine and knotty pair of knuckles.”<sup>4</sup>

God’s reign is like that yeast—it only takes a little to leaven the whole loaf. But once leavened, the entire huge batch will rise. I can smell it in the oven already—can’t you?

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the painting and auction is culled from an article by art critic Philip Kennecott in *The Washington Post*, as published in the Friday, November 17, 2017, edition of *The Seattle Times*, page A3. You can find the Washington Post article here: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/11/16/a-leonardo-sells-for-450-million-but-what-did-the-buyer-actually-get/?utm\\_term=.ea6433b4084b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/11/16/a-leonardo-sells-for-450-million-but-what-did-the-buyer-actually-get/?utm_term=.ea6433b4084b)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Inspired by a poem of Alla Renee Bozarth, published in *Earth Prayers*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) p. 162.

**In the second parable** we feel the excitement—and adrenaline—build, as the unsuspecting person stumbles upon a treasure-laden field—and cleans out his life savings in order to possess it.

This parable leaves open the question of whether the treasure is supposed to be A SPECIFIC OBJECT left in the field or if it is instead the FIELD ITSELF—a richly fertile parcel of land which, the discoverer is convinced, will sustain him and his for generations.

**It's the third parable that, on the surface at least, shares the most affinity with the story of the da Vinci painting:** A merchant hunting for fine pearls finds one of incomparable value, and to acquire this single pearl he invests everything he has.

**In this parable authenticity is assumed. But when it comes to Leonardo's Salvador Mundi, it's hard to imagine the issue of authenticity going away anytime soon.**

“We are in the age of post-mechanical reproduction,” writes art critic Philip Kennecott, “when the idea that there are ‘original’ images and ‘copies’ is barely sustainable. On the internet, where most people live their intellectual lives, everything is a copy. And anyone can fabricate anything.

Perhaps that explains why [the prices for a painting assumed to be by a master can] go crazy. What [is] being sold [isn't] a painting or an image or even an idea by Leonardo. It [is] a relic of physical touch.”<sup>5</sup>

**We long for connection to things that are authentic, things that are real.**

We want real friendships, true relationships, and when we discover them—they become the leaven for our loaf; they become priceless treasures.

**What are we formed for? God forms us to be members of authentic, real communities. For such communities are potent incubators of love and justice, joy and generosity.**

**This is the true antidote** to all the “fake this” and “fake that”; to all the self-serving, self-authenticating rhetoric and behavior that threatens to bulldoze and pave over our common life.

God has not formed us to be in our own insulated, isolated echo chambers with weapons at the ready, but to gather as sisters and brothers with Christ around Font and Table, to be Christ for one another—not mere “relics of touch” but fully authenticated, fully embodied servants who carry love and justice, joy and generosity in the clay jars of our lives.

Now, because we are earthen vessels—(news flash: there ain't no other kind!)—we know from the get-go that the life we share isn't always going to look pretty. We mess up; we make mistakes. We offend each other at times, misjudge, step on one another's toes, get in each other's hair!

**That all comes with the territory of being human!**

**The question is, what are we going to do with it?**

And the answer is, we're going to keep on giving each other the benefit of the doubt; we're going to keep on practicing forgiveness; we're going to keep on learning to “accept the things we cannot change” in ourselves and in others.

Because we are apprenticed to Jesus, we are learning to look at one another through his eyes.

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Kennecott, op. cit.

And when we look at each other through his eyes, our true value shines through.

**There's a detail worth noticing in the last of our three gospel parables—a crucial one, it turns out, though I have never noticed it before (!)**

**It's not the precious pearl itself which is likened to God's reign in this parable, but rather the merchant who's on the hunt for such treasure. (say it again...)**

**On the fulcrum of this detail, the whole meaning of the parable pivots.**

For when we liken the merchant to God, then we might well see that it is God who's on the hunt for precious pearls, and having discovered what he was looking for in YOU, in ME, he puts all that he has on the line in order to make us his own.

“Thus says the Lord, who created you, who formed you: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine...  
You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.”<sup>6</sup>

Rachel Naomi Remen writes:

“Sometimes we live in ways that are too small, and in places that focus and develop only a part of who we are. When we do, the life in us may become squeezed into a shape that is not our own. We may not even realize that this is so.

Despite this, something deep in us that holds our integrity inviolate will find ways to remind us of the breadth and depth of the life in us and assert its wholeness.”<sup>7</sup>

That “*something deep in us*” has a name in our tradition: Holy Spirit.

**In the calling, claiming, and naming of baptism, this Spirit was planted firmly within us, and began the work of fashioning us into the earthen vessel of community.**

**And at the Table, we take in the breadth and depth of this sacred life as bread and wine.**

**Through these means of grace, poured out for us and for all in Jesus, God says unequivocally:  
You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you!**

**There is no form of authenticity greater than this.**

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 43:1, 3

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings*. (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 2000), page 53.