



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

760 East Broad Street • Columbus Ohio 43205 • (614) 221-6552 • fax (614) 221-5722 • [www.bspsc.org](http://www.bspsc.org)

### “The Pearl of Great Price”

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46, 51-52

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Reverend Ann Palmerton  
Broad Street Presbyterian Church  
Columbus, OH

In the movie *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Harry is at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He’s nervous when it comes to being sorted into one of four school Houses. He wants to be placed in the Gryffindor house. It’s what he longs for, it’s his heart’s desire, but will the Sorting Hat cooperate?

For anyone unfamiliar with the world of Harry Potter, the Sorting Hat is a Hogwarts artifact. Most of the time it’s just an old, battered brown hat. But when it’s placed on a new student’s head, it comes alive. It speaks and magically determines the best house for that student.

The Sorting Hat is placed on Harry’s head. It speaks, “Hmm. Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There’s talent, oh my goodness, yes – and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that’s interesting...So where shall I put you?”

Harry Potter, with all the longing in his heart, insists, “Not Slytherin, not Slytherin.”

The Sorting Hat replies, “Not Slytherin, eh? Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it’s all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that – no? Well, if you’re sure – better be GRYFFINDOR!”<sup>1</sup>

Harry’s earnest longing persuades the Sorting Hat and he’s placed into Gryffindor with his new friends. In Harry Potter world, the Sorting Hat honors one’s deepest longings.

Today we heard the Nickey family read four parables; four short little stories that Jesus told. In two of these stories, longing plays an important role. Today I’m focusing on the parable often called The Pearl of Great Price:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:45-46)

A merchant seeks and finds. Then he sells everything for the sake of one thing, one wonderful thing that is beyond all his expectations.

Jesus seems to be saying that this single-minded response, this longing, is like the realm of heaven. Or maybe Jesus is saying that the realm of heaven reveals our longings. Harry Potter may not be aware that he longs for friends who are honest and true until he commits himself to Gryffindor.

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<sup>1</sup> Video from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fA3dbvRCui0>

Congressman and civil rights icon John Lewis died from cancer on July 17. To me, his inspiring life illustrates our parable. His life was a search full of activist work, spanning decades and movements. At an early age, he discovered his one pearl of great value, something for which he was willing to pay any price, even with his own life. For Lewis that pearl was racial justice. At the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on “Bloody Sunday” in 1965, John Lewis marched for racial justice. He knew it was possible. He saw a future few could envision. His determination to access the one pearl of “liberty and justice for all” nearly cost him his life.



Beaten and bloodied, the photo of his sacrifice shocked the nation and moved Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965 a few months later. He survived and matured into an elder statesman. He encouraged the nation’s youth to start “good trouble” as he called it, and he modeled how to do that.



His fearless longing for justice and equality earned him the title the “Conscience of Congress.”

Over time, John Lewis became what he longed for, became what he sought. He kept valuing the great pearl of racial justice, and as his life unfolded, he became a man of equality and justice. As if a spiritual alchemy took place, between the seeker and that which was sought after. We become like that for which we most long.

By grace, through faith, through forgiveness and determination, Lewis did not internalize hatred. He did not live out of a resentful, bitter place. His life sheds light on our journey as disciples. Both his life and our parable are windows to the transforming power of God. Honoring Lewis' memory calls us to get in touch with our deepest longings, calls us to consider and reconsider our priorities.

In our parable, the merchant recognizes what has true value for him. Then he single-mindedly does what he needs to obtain it. His search raises questions about our own searching. How do we know our heart's desire? Will we know what we truly want when we see it? The parable probes us to identify our pearl of great value, our ultimate concern.

Oddly, serendipitously, the word for pearl in Greek is 'margarita'. Rabbi and author Amy-Jill Levine shares a story about this word margarita and our parable. A woman in one of her classes reads the parable and then reflects openly about her life. She is in recovery from alcoholism. For her a margarita, the drink, was, for a while, all she longed for. It was her pearl. She describes how she sold everything – home, food, family – for another drink. Her story reminds us that not all pearls are cultured; some are fake, with an exceptionally high cost.<sup>2</sup>

Our parable challenges our sense of what is truly valuable. This is what parables do.

At the end of our reading, Jesus asks the disciples a question: "Have you understood all this?" They answer "Yes." I can't help but wonder if their answer was a confident "Yes" or a much more hesitant "Yes?" As in, "Jesus, why do you keep speaking to us in parables? Why can't you be more direct? If you want us to sell everything, say so. We've already reprioritized our lives in order to journey this far with you."

So, I pose Jesus' question to you. Have you understood all this? This week as I've pondered Jesus' parables, I'm the first to admit there's still more to them. But maybe that's the point, because parables aren't neat, tidy snapshots. They are complicated little stories, with multiple possible interpretations. Which means we can't exhaust their meaning.

In our scripture reading, the realm of heaven is hidden, as a mustard seed in the ground, as yeast in flour, as treasure in a field, and as a pearl of great value hidden among the rest. Hidden, but also in plain sight; in the back yard, at home, at work, along the way. The Spirit uses our longing, our attentiveness, and the process of our searching to companion us on this journey as disciples.

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. (Psalm 42:1-2a)

Back to John Lewis. In June of 2018 he tweeted:

Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.<sup>3</sup>

Lewis is talking about the journey, the search for God's realm, on earth as it is in heaven. "Do not get lost in a sea of despair," he says. "Be hopeful." By faith, Lewis stayed optimistic. No, that's not it. By faith, he became so much more than optimistic. He became joyful. Like someone who has found a pearl of great price. Joyful. Full of joy.

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<sup>2</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, (HarperOne, New York, 2014), pp. 163-164

<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/rejohnlewis/status/1011991303599607808?lang=en>

A song that still brings the world joy is The Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun." It's got a catchy, lilting melody and hopeful words. This spring and summer, hospitals have played it repeatedly over their public-address systems. At Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, "Here Comes the Sun" starts up every time a coronavirus patient is discharged or recovers enough to breathe without the help of a ventilator. It's like a pearl, searched for, and finally found. One day this spring, the song played 20 times. A nurse manager remembers that each repetition made her feel better. "It was an overwhelming sense of, wow, we're making a difference. I got very teary-eyed."<sup>4</sup>

"Here Comes the Sun" was composed when all seemed to be going wrong within The Beatles. George Harrison couldn't bring himself to face another stress-filled business meeting with bandmates and accountants. So instead, he went to the home of his friend Eric Clapton. There, while walking around the garden, Harrison came up with the melody. A melody that still gifts the world with joy. It was as if he'd found the pearl he'd been searching for.<sup>5</sup>

*Here comes the sun  
Here comes the sun, and I say  
It's all right...*

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Sari Harrar, "Happiness in Hard Times," *AARP Magazine*, June/July 2020, p. 57

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60