

Jesus and the Venus Rosewater Dish
July 27th, 2008

Scripture: Matthew 13:31-33

Scripture: Matthew 13:44-52

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on July 27th, 2008 at Northminster Presbyterian Church.

It's a dish.

A little more than 18 inches in diameter. Made of sterling silver. Around the rim appears the goddess Minerva, with symbols for the liberal arts: arithmetic, astrology, dialectic, geometry, grammar, music and rhetoric.

There's nothing on the dish about tennis. This is strange, given the fact that it's the trophy awarded to the ladies' singles champion at Wimbledon, the tennis tournament that ended just a few weeks ago. And while I don't follow the sport, I did look it up and even I recognized the name of the woman who won it this year. Her name was Venus Williams of the United States.

"The Venus Rosewater Dish" that's what the trophy is called, and the "Venus" part was there long before Venus Williams won even the first time.

The dish was made in 1864, and has been awarded to the singles champ since 1886. The winners get to *hold* the dish, but they don't get to *keep* it. The original stays in the Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum, and the winner gets an 8-inch replica and prize money — roughly \$1.4 million.

Not a bad consolation prize.

Now if you were to run across this dish in an art gallery, you might say, "Huh?" It looks like something that should be propped up in your grandmother's china cabinet. But if you're a tennis player, the Dish is a precious treasure, a holy grail, a pearl of great value. Players from around the world push themselves to their physical and mental limits — training, practicing, focusing, competing — hoping to be able to play at Wimbledon, the most prestigious tennis tournament in the

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world. And all the way, they are dreaming of the Venus Rosewater Dish.

Of course, this trophy is not unique. There is no lack of odd prizes that people pursue with passion and single-minded purpose.

Consider:

The Borg-Warner Trophy, awarded to the winner of the Indianapolis 500 since 1936. On the trophy are the sculpted faces of each winner, and the cup's hollow body is reportedly able to hold 48 cans of beer.

The Green Jacket, given to the winner of the Masters Golf Tournament since 1949. Winners are thrilled to wear the coveted Green Jacket, even though it's really not the kind of jacket you'd wear unless you were in an Irish pub — or had just won the Masters. It's ugly.

An Olive Wreath, placed on the heads of Boston Marathon winners since 1897. These olive branches are cut from groves in Marathon, Greece, the scene of the battle from which the original marathoner, a man named Pheidippides, ran to announce the Athenian victory in 490 B.C. Then he dropped dead.

Now check out Matthew 13, and you discover *another* set of rather peculiar prizes that people pursue with passion and purpose, using every ounce of their heart, soul, mind and strength. The single unifying theme is that these treasures are all illustrations of or metaphors for the kingdom of God.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field,” says Jesus, “which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matthew 13:44).

Jesus goes on to say, “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” (v. 46).

The kingdom of heaven is like the Venus Rosewater Dish, a treasure hidden in a field, the America's Cup, a pearl of great value, the World Series Ring. But are we pursuing the kingdom of God with the

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passion of Wimbledon tennis players, America's Cup sailors and World Series sluggers?

Where are *our* attitude, determination and desire?

Where's the sense that we are on a mission?

It takes focus and passion to pursue a heavenly prize. The person who finds treasure in a field "goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (v. 44). The merchant who found a pearl of great value "went and sold all that he had and bought it" (v. 45). That's focus. That's sacrifice. That's passion and purpose.

You have to admire the determination of A.J. Jacobs, an editor for *Esquire* magazine, who decided to spend a year living the Bible — literally. He packed away any of his clothes that were made of mixed fibers, since this is prohibited in Leviticus 19:19. He made a commitment to stop lying, speaking evil, gossiping, complaining and despising his neighbor — hard to do in New York City. He did this because he was impressed by the power of religion as "an enduring force," and he was determined to explore his own religious background.

What amazed him was how this focus and passion changed him. As he was learning to pray one day, he stood up before tasting his lunch of hummus and pita bread, closed his eyes and said, "I'd like to thank God for the land that he provided so that this food might be grown."

Now you might think that this prayer would be enough, especially for a beginner. But he found that his gratitude went further. "I'd like to thank the farmer who grew the chickpeas for this hummus," he said. "And the worker who picked the chickpeas. And the truckers who drove them to the store. And the old Italian lady who sold the hummus to me at Zingone's deli and told me, 'Lots of love.'"

A.J. Jacobs discovered that giving thanks to God feels good. It makes him feel more connected, more grateful, more grounded, more aware of his place in the world. Prayer reminds him that food doesn't spontaneously appear in his refrigerator, and that he's lucky to have food at all.

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These are good insights, and they are making A.J. Jacobs a better person. But none of this would have happened if he had not focused on living the Bible for a year.

So ... where's our focus? Our sacrifice? Our passion and purpose? What's your Venus Rosewater Dish?

Earthly prizes are fairly easy to identify, whether they be winning championships or achieving sales goals, losing weight or gaining an advanced degree. But heavenly prizes? These are a bit more difficult to visualize.

Still, give it a try. Imagine yourself living by the Ten Commandments... or the Sermon on the Mount. Picture yourself digging into the parables of Jesus, the letters of Paul, the books of Anne Lamott. Commit yourself to starting each day with prayer, treating your neighbor as you would like to be treated, or serving Jesus Christ by serving the hungry or the homeless.

Each is a worthwhile goal, and each requires determination, desire and a sense of mission. Each will challenge you, reward you and turn you ever-so-slowly into a better person.

The stakes are high when you pick a prize and pursue it. Every choice is going to have consequences. "Again," says Jesus, "the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad" (vv. 47-48). So it will be at the end of time, says Jesus, when the angels of God separate the evil from the righteous.

You have to pick your prize well, warns Jesus. Make it a heavenly prize, if you want to move in a heavenly direction.

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The good news is that we don't have to win any world championships to live a life that is pleasing to God. Jesus describes the kingdom of God as a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds that grows into "the greatest of shrubs" (vv. 31-32). And he says that the kingdom "is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened" (v. 33). The point is that small acts can lead to great results. Small acts of love and faithfulness can transform the world around us, changing both ourselves and our communities for the better.

In the end, the Venus Rosewater Dish is just a silver plate, an earthly prize. But it is a clear reminder of the importance of focus, sacrifice, passion and purpose.

Let's bring these qualities to life, in pursuit of a heavenly prize.