



LESSONS IN LIVING

“Pearls Before Swine”



A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
September 21, 2025

Scripture Reading: Matthew 7:6 (*The Inclusive Bible*)
(*Jesus is teaching*) “Don't give dogs what is sacred; don't throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they'll just trample them underfoot, then turn and tear you to pieces.”

Sermon

OK, it's too late to find another church. (*laughter*) Today, we're going to look at one of the problematic verses, obviously, from the Sermon on the Mount. I separated it out because it's just so weird, and it seems really mean. The way we're approaching it today is to ask the question, where is the love in this passage?

The difference, in my opinion, between fundamentalism and mysticism is, fundamentalism is trying to get back to the roots. The question there is, what did Jesus say back in history? To me, a more important question is, how can we bring love into the present age? To me, that's the purpose of the teachings. Jesus lived in a very different time. We can't get back to that understanding. To me, the purpose of the ancient writings is to illumine our current day. But in order to do that, we have to feel enormous freedom. Paul talked a lot about Christian freedom. Nobody can tell you what's in your own heart. When we talk about interpreting things, it's your life, and you need to be the one that decides what words mean for you.

Back in Jesus's day, Gentiles were sometimes called dogs. I don't know who he's talking about with the pigs, but it's probably not complimentary. But when we look at the Sermon on the Mount as a whole, it doesn't make any sense to take it in the modern sense of not wasting your gifts on those that are not worthy. The passage right before this is about not judging people. I think calling them pigs would be fairly judgmental. Plus, when we look at the life of Jesus, it was precisely the people rejected by his culture, by his religion, by the cultural time in which he lived, that he called people out of that. He said, That's not the true Judaism. That's not the real Israel. We can do better than that.

As we look at this passage, I'm hoping that we won't approach it from a fundamentalist viewpoint. Of trying to get back to some ancient understanding. But instead, ask the question, can these words illumine our life? Can they illumine them today? Is there any gift they bring to our current situation? If we approach the passage, assuming that there's something loving in there somewhere, I think the emphasis pulls away from the pigs, and the dogs, and who those are, to the pearl.

It seems to me Jesus believed that every human being has something sacred within them. It seems to me he believed that we're of infinite worth. A pearl was the most precious thing that many of these cultures had. It came from the depths of the sea, very mysterious. I think what he's saying is that there's a part of you that comes from the mystery of things. There's a part of you that comes straight out of the generative principle of the universe. At the big bang, I think Jesus believed the universe was already pregnant with you. Somehow, subliminally, primordially, the universe was moving towards you as a manifestation.

We're going to shift the emphasis from what did the pig mean, what did the dog mean, to what is the pearl within us? You may not believe in souls, but I don't think Jesus was trying to take you to that place. I think he was trying to put you in touch with the essence of your own being. What is it within you that feels sacred, that feels like a gift to the world?

I don't think the pigs were used as an example because pigs are bad. They're used as an example because they don't care about pearls. A pig has no use for a pearl. It's not a bad thing. But they're probably either going to try to eat it, which is a choking hazard, or they say trample on it. I doubt that Jesus had individuals in mind. At the same time, when we live in our appetites, it's possible for us to become very cruel and very frightened. And we see our world in the grip of that fear, of that hatred, of that ignorance. I think what Jesus is saying is, don't let somebody else's foolishness eclipse your wisdom. Don't let somebody else's hate erase your love. Don't let somebody else who doesn't value you, keep you from giving this incredible gift you have to give the world.

I was talking earlier this week with a transgender man, and he was talking about how his family had rejected him. As he spoke, I thought, that's what this verse is really talking about. In a world where you are dehumanized, where you are not valued, there's a place within you that you shouldn't throw to the people who can't love you, who can't honor you.

It was Emerson – let's see if I can find the quote within 10 minutes – I love this quote. The problem with Emerson, though, is that most of the quotes are fake online. So who knows who said this, really? (*laughter*) Next to Einstein and Buddha. It's like Emerson gets...

To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.

I think that's what Jesus is saying. You can't look in somebody else's eye and see your own worth. Sometimes, sadly, we go to the people who don't honor us and try to win their approval. It doesn't make them bad or evil. But Jesus is saying, don't squander the gift that you have to give because somebody else can't see it. It's always true of sacred things that some people can't see it. He's saying, you have that within you. You are a gift to the universe. You're a gift of the

universe. So being yourself when other people don't believe in you is the most radical, revolutionary thing you can do. As long as we're pretending to be what we're not, the change doesn't take place. And one of the reasons that has created the MAGA movement is people are rising up and claiming their humanity.

What we're seeing is the death throes of patriarchy. We're seeing the death throes of capitalism. We're seeing the death throes of homophobia. We have to hold on for each other and not be discouraged during this time. You being yourself is exactly what Jesus is teaching. Not putting on a mask that the Church tells you, not saying the things to believe the Church tells you to believe, but being authentic in your own heart, taking the mask off and realizing that you are a gift.

The last thing I want to point out from the story. In the ancient world, they marveled with the fact that pearls came from a wound within the shell of the creature that created it. Maybe sand, something that's scratched. To realize that sometimes what you consider to be your worst failure, your greatest wound, is the place that the miracle is going to come through. That sometimes the rebirth takes place through the place of our failure, the place of what we are most embarrassed about.

Another great line – I love Cornel West. He's the one who said “*Justice is what love looks like in public,*” which is a great line. Another great line is – he says, “*The condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak,*” which means to tend to the suffering of the least of these, of the orphan, the widow, the poor, the working people, the gay brother, the lesbian sister, the transgender person, the black people. Obviously, the list could go on and on. Immigrants, everybody who's being dehumanized by the MAGA movement.

To realize that there's a miracle happening through you. It's not something you have to figure out that somebody else teaches you. It's who you most essentially are. That when you are true to yourself, you're changing the world. That's not something the MAGA movement can stop. The MAGA movement is a dead, skeletal hand on the past. The incident that took place with Charlie Kirk, it's a tragedy. But when they said, “*They killed Charlie,*” meaning you and me, we understood how dangerous our time is, but also how essential, to give a gift to children of fearless compassion. A fierce love that doesn't get extinguished just because somebody else doesn't believe in us.

I was not exactly welcome in a lot of Presbyterian circles. I was on trial for decades. I was framed. (*laughter*) I didn't know they were gay when I did the wedding. (*laughter*) But we looked back at those being wonderful moments. They may have been frightening at the time, but what a gift to have been able to do that. I was at the seminary Friday. I'm being asked back on Presbyterian committees. Almost everybody we talk to, I'm on the Preparation for Ministry. People that are just beginning the journey to become a student at the seminary. Every one of them was late in life, had huge obstacles, had people that didn't believe in them, and had found themselves.

There was one woman who is from Africa. Her husband had been ordained in Africa. The spouse can't be ordained in that culture. What a loving husband to move to the States where she could

also answer her call and be who she is. The committee asked her, *“What is it that you're hoping to do in ministry?”* She said, *“My goal is to be a light.”* I thought, that's somebody that understands. That's somebody who understands what we're doing here.

Think if you left here consecrated and dedicated to be a light. Nobody else telling you what that means. Nobody giving you directions about what that's going to look like. Who could stop you from giving your gift? If that was your goal? The darker your surroundings got, the more radiant your light would be.

So the passage we're looking at *“Do not cast your pearls before swine,”* sounds really mean, but I think there's compassion. I think they're saying, Don't look at whether the pig is worthy, this isn't criticism of the pig. This is praise for the pearl that's in each of us. It's a warning not to let anyone talk you out of giving your gift. If someone cannot see you, you don't need their approval. You don't need the Church's approval. One of the things I learned very early in the struggle for LGBTQ rights within the Presbyterian church is the Church doesn't make love sacred. It's love that makes the Church sacred. So never second-guess yourself. Hear your calling, shine your light, and no matter how bad things get, know that the darker it is, the more radiant and necessary your light will be.

Well, we invite you now to take a moment to think of how you would understand these words.

Benediction

Rev. Babs Miller

Each and every one of you are a priceless gift to our world and you also are a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call God. That spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That spirit knows when you cry in the darkness or go out and admire a butterfly in nature. So go out into this wonderful creation. Tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and have fun in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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