



**Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church**  
*Connecting faith with everyday life*

Sermon Archives

Date: February 19, 2017

Title: "Pigs and Pearls"

Scripture: Matthew 7:1-8

Description: "Don't cast your pearls before swine", teaches Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. What does that mean? To take the Bible seriously, you have to go beyond the simple and literal. Pearls before swine is about trusting people without trying to manipulate them.

Maybe you don't want this in your pastor, but I have this part of me, deep down inside, that longs to behave badly. Maybe it's a rebel thing born during my college years, but sometimes I don't want to be nice and obedient and do as I'm told. This is one of those times. (Toss handfuls of pearls in front of ceramic pigs.) "Do not cast your pearls before swine," says the Bible, but sometimes I just can't help myself.

You don't have that problem, do you. You're carrying a pocketful of pearls and some swine cross your path, you say, "Oh my! What should I do? I don't know..." Then you remember that the Bible says, "Do not cast your pearls before swine," and that makes it easy, "Oh yeah. I won't cast my pearls."

It's a strange thing for Jesus to say, don't you think? The thing is, I'm not tempted to cast my pearls before swine. Yet, right in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, which is a collection of Jesus' best teaching—this gem of wisdom. What's that about? What does that mean?

Let me take you on a brief side trip before we really go down that road. Some people say that the only way to honor scripture is to affirm the inerrancy of the Bible and literal interpretation. Inerrancy means that the Bible is true in every detail, not just regarding faith but also things like physics and geography. Literal interpretation affirms that the Bible means exactly what it says. If it says Jonah was swallowed by a whale, that was a real Orca with a big belly. When it says a snake tempted Adam and Eve, that was an actual talking snake. If you don't believe it literally, you don't believe the Bible. But literally, when the Bible says, "Do not cast your pearls before swine," all it's talking about are pearls and pigs. No more.

Often a literal interpretation is the most superficial interpretation, and does not honor the power of scripture at all. Often to honor something requires that you ask what's the thing beneath the thing. A child offers you a gift. You can see a wrinkled piece of scrap paper, or you can see a meticulously created portrait of you and the child together. You recognize the value of the drawing only if you go beyond the actual paper and lines of crayon to see a gift of love offered you by a child. Look for the thing beneath the thing. This saying of Jesus: "Do not give

what is holy to the dogs, nor throw your pearls before swine." What's the thing beneath the thing?

It's in Matthew 7:6, in the Sermon on the Mount. In the paragraph before verse 6, Jesus teaches us not to judge others. "Judge not that you be not judged..." begins the chapter in verse one. Before that, in the last part of chapter six, we're told, "...do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink..." (v.25) "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own." (34) Life with God is about trusting. That's the center and core. Life doesn't come from attaining power or financial reserves, or any other resource that enables us to control things. Life comes from trusting yourself to God, even trusting your physical well-being to God. When you live free of worry and anxiety, you are alive indeed.

Not only trusting God about whether I reach heaven and eternal salvation, and about the quality of my spiritual life and faith. Jesus challenges me to trust God with my basic needs and physical wellbeing. Now that's a challenge. Then he throws out something equally as demanding. Not only am I to trust God with my own life, but I'm to trust God regarding others as well.

"Do not judge," he says. Judging is condemning people. Judging marginalizes people *in order to control them*. It controls them by creating a distance between them and me. "Stay away from them. I'm not like them; I'm better than that." If we judge them, perhaps we can distance them, shame them, correct them, get them to change through negativity. Best of all, perhaps we can protect ourselves by getting them to be like us.

"Do not judge..." then, "Do not cast your pearls before swine." Pearls are good things. So are pigs. I like me some bacon, some pulled-pork barbeque, and I'm a big fan of that game played with a "pigskin." The Old Testament laws about staying kosher simply says, "Don't eat pigs." It doesn't say pigs are evil and should be destroyed. Pigs have their place in the realm of creation. Sometimes we try to control others by giving them good things, and casting pearls before pigs is giving them good things they're not ready for.

Did you catch the first part of that verse about pearls and pigs? "Do not give what is holy to the dogs." Same thing, in different words. Dogs are good. Anybody out there a dog-hater? I love animals, especially dogs, and most especially the dog who is a member of my family. Someone in my family has been known to feed our dog scraps of food from the table. (That would be me.) I figure, "no harm, no foul", and what's the harm in that little bit of burger that fell off the bun? Or that edge bite of chicken kind of crusty from being on the grill? Besides, I only do this when our dog asks, gazing at me with those big brown eyes and touching me gently with his paw.

Whatever food I offer, the dog accepts...shall I say "readily"? *Gulp!!* A quick "snarf" and it's gone. Whether it's a bite of the finest steak, medium rare, Mom's home-made meatloaf, or a cayenne pepper rubbed, Tabasco-infused, slathered-in-salsa fajita. *Gulp!* In an instant, it's gone. That puppy does not discriminate. He does not have the capacity to discern between what is healthy for him and what he will pay the price for later. (Yes, I acknowledge that dog and master are much alike.)

Don't throw what is holy to those who don't honor it. Most of us have at least two pearls of great price: our time and our money. The dogs out there will

hound you for your time. A hundred times a day, they will beg for it, demand it, require and request it. You only have 24 pearls a day. Don't just throw them away any old where. A hundred thousand times a day they'll want your money. "Buy me! You really can't resist me, can you? Can you live without me?" Throw away your pearls carelessly, and they'll be back in a heartbeat, begging for more.

What if this saying isn't about literal pearls? This whole section of the Sermon on the Mount is about the pearl of power. It's about the power of your life, the part of you that has the potency to make a difference, to impact the world around you, and thus to live like someone created in the image of God. Use your power well.

"Judge not." Judging is using power to control people in a negative way. If we judge them, perhaps we can shame them, ostracize them, correct them. Maybe we can get them to change through negativity. It's trying to control someone by giving them bad things. Judging has a serious downside. People will respond if they're made to feel guilty. Often you can get people to change their behavior by guiltning them into it. But in the long run, over time, that guilt will turn into deep hostility towards the source of the guilt. You know anybody like that?

When people are told that if they don't do certain things, they'll be unacceptable, condemned, sent to hell forever—that's a lot of power being used in a negative way. The misuse of power always leads to greater misuse of power. Am I right? Can you think of any time throughout history, except for the cross, when the misuse of power did not generate more misuse of power. Controlling people through guilt is a form of violence. And violence is not the way of Christ.

"Do not judge..." Judging is trying to control someone by giving them bad things; pearls try to control through giving good things. "Casting your pearls before swine" is giving something good to something that is unable to appreciate it or understand it. A pig doesn't go, "Oh, I know what to do with these!"

Most of the time when pearls get cast to pigs, it's because somebody wants the pig to change. It's a way of trying to control the pig. It's the flip side of judging or condemning. How many of you know a person who will have nothing to do with the faith because when they were a kid they had the faith rammed down their throats? Nothing wrong with teaching a child the ways of faith. That's a good thing. That's a pearl of a good thing. But don't force feed anyone when they aren't ready for it. "...or they will trample them underfoot and turn on you."

Therapists say that the hardest part of doing therapy well is knowing what the client needs, but waiting until the client is ready for it. Waiting until the client wants to hear it and receive it. A wise therapist knows that feelings must be heard before behavior can change.

Anybody out there have a boss or a teacher or a parent who tries to change you or please you or control you with pearls? Sometimes it works—barely, sort of, reluctantly. "Do not cast your pearls..." Don't try to control people through good things.

You have power. You have an impressive amount of power within you. God put it there. Your greatest power, your pearl of great price, is your power to love. If I love someone in order to change them, it isn't love. It's manipulation.

"Do not worry about...what you'll eat, drink, wear. Don't worry about tomorrow," Jesus taught. Don't worry, but trust. Anxiety generates the need to control; trust generates the ability to love.

I have some pearls. I'd like to give each one of you a pearl, to carry with you this week. Here's what I want you to do with your pearl...do anything you wish. I trust you. They're pearls, and you know what they're worth to you. I trust you and the God within you. You'll know what to do. Amen.