

*On October 27th, my friend Jim Gilliland was shot and killed in front of his house, as he returned home from choir practice at his church. Jim was 62 years old. He was accomplished in so many ways—a successful lawyer, a philanthropist and non-profit leader, co-creator of a wonderful family that includes four young adult children.*

*Jim's memorial service took place on November 5, 2016, at First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley. Because many people said that my words at that service were helpful to them in their grief and sense of disorientation about this death, I offer them to you here, with hope that they might bless you.*

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Jim and Vickie have been my friends for almost twenty years. I share your sadness; and no doubt your sense that somehow the earth has tipped off its axis, for us to be here today—doing this, talking about Jim.

This is what we do when the ground under our feet ruptures. We come together. It's not just important; it's imperative. A moment as senseless and life-altering as this one requires us to hold on to each other. We dare not splinter into our own little corners to re-write our private explanations of a world in which this awful, impossible thing could happen.

By being here today—in your willingness to face into this sorrow—you have become not just a spectator, but a participant. A witness to the power of life as Jim travels beyond death. You are helping place Jim into the hands of his Creator, who has promised to love him longer and more completely than we can imagine. We are partners in letting him go. And we are sharers in a sort of collective humility. A humility that is required to keep us from losing our humanity to a useless anger; to simply *be* in the face of something that we do not understand. You lend your presence today to what might be the hardest thing of all: to trust that in some way we cannot know right now, *all shall be well*. For Jim. For his family. For all of us.

Every death is important in its own way, of course; but this one in particular calls on us to announce not just our sadness but our deepest convictions. We gather to tell the story of the life of this good man. But we also gather at this moment to remember who we are. To tell an ancient and still-true story that includes both life and death; the possibility of senseless tragedy and moments of unspeakable beauty and love.

It is possible, even in the midst of sadness, to be grateful—for Jim's life, for the privilege of knowing him. Grateful too for a hope that sustains us at moments like this, when things happen that are all upside-down and out of our control. There is a word of grace for this moment, and it is this: that the God of the universe has promised that death and sorrow and sadness are never, never the last word about life. That there is, in some way beyond our understanding, life that stretches beyond this life we have known.

So today we will speak of meaning. The meaning of Jim's life, and of the lessons he has left to us. But let us not look for meaning in the act of Jim's death. There is none. There is no answer to the 'why' question we so want to ask. The God I know seems never to answer that question. But there is a question that matters more; and this question God does answer, every time we ask it: And now, how shall we live?

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*“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he found one very precious pearl, he went and sold all that he owned and bought it.”*

If you have been trained as a lawyer, as so many of us have been, you are well equipped to examine the words of the sacred texts we just heard for their logic; to critique their precise meaning; maybe even to object on the grounds of relevance. I’m asking you to put all those skills aside for a moment, though, so you can hear the spirit of this two-sentence story that the wise teacher Jesus told more than 2,000 years ago.

It’s the story of a person whose business it was to seek and buy and trade in fine things. Treasures; jewels that held value in all the ways we know how to measure. It was a successful, prosperous business; this merchant had a life that other people envied.

But then one day, a pearl came into his sight that he could see was something special. Among all those other gems that had come through his hands, treasures that other people admired and were willing to pay good money for, this one seemed extraordinarily beautiful, precious. It made no sense to him to buy and then sell it as he had every other gem in his collection. In fact, he sold every piece of his inventory—diamonds and gold, rubies, emeralds—so that he could own this one pearl. He simply went out of business. He no longer looked for anything more precious than this pearl. He never traded again, never tried to ‘monetize’ this asset. Stopped worrying about adding to his investments. *This* was the pearl that mattered.

There is nothing enterprising, or even rational, about what that guy did. His actions violate pretty much every piece of good business advice you or I might have offered him. But like most of the things Jesus said, this story was intended to disrupt his listeners’ thinking, leave us a little off-balance. And it does. Because what this story seems to say is: For all the seeking and striving we are inclined to do, a good life, an authentic life, is knowing what is worth stopping all that for. Recognizing when it’s time to stop trading up. Realizing that the life you are already holding is the precious thing worth *not* preserving other other options for. Knowing that *this* is enough.

I think the extraordinary thing about my friend Jim Gilliland—the thing that filled his life with richness and regularly reminded him not to take himself too seriously, the thing that made us all want to be around him—is that Jim knew he held that pearl. Jim treasured his work and his colleagues and his clients. He held on for the long haul to his church, and especially to a choir with whom he made beautiful music that mattered. He thought it a privilege to give his time and money to volunteer commitments that make a difference. He held on tenaciously—leaned in—to the relationships that gave him life—friends and family alike. Most especially his children. He stood unshakably on the solid ground he found beneath his feet, which was—more than anything—being with you, Vickie.

I don’t have much doubt that today, Jim is missing you as much as you are missing him. That all this last week, there has been weeping in heaven to match our tears on earth. And still, even

amid this great sadness, I believe—as surely as I know anything—that Jim is held safely in the hands of the God who has never, never let him slip out of his grasp, not for one minute. I imagine that precious pearl is still held tightly in Jim’s hand. And it is, as it always has been, enough. Worth everything else.



Oscar Wilde once said, “Where there is sorrow, there is holy ground.” Indeed; the ground below us has been made holy by our tears.

There is nothing more powerful than grief to tear away the masks we present to the world. To strip us of all our pretense; to reveal how unspectacularly human we really are.

This is one more gift Jim has given us. Thank you, Jim. Thank you, God. For this life we have been privileged to share. For the grace of healing and forgiveness that will come, even now; maybe even in spite of us. Let this be a moment in which our hearts are cracked open and enlarged. Go now in peace, in hope, and in kindness.

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