Sunday, May 6, 1979
THE APPRAISER
Matthew 13:44-48

One of the more fascinating professions in our world is that of the “appraiser.” An appraiser is an expert judge of value, a person with keen instructed eyes who is able to estimate the quality, size, weight and value of things. There are appraisers of real estate, appraisers of diamonds and jewelry, appraisers of almost every kind of object or property imaginable.

The appraiser has played an important role in our history and still fulfills a significant place in our everyday world. The appraiser can be a person to reckon with. He or she puts a value on a whole estate. Sometimes it has been a calamity to the eager heirs of an estate to have the appraiser come and put a piercing eye on everything. The family diamond brooch is turned over to him, a piece of legendary value. “Sorry madam, pure past!” The priceless piece of furniture alleged to have come over to Salem, Massachusetts, in 1662. Early American furniture. “Very sorry, madam, this is not Early American 1662, it is late Grand Rapids 1932! Having something appraised can be a shattering experience.

On the other hand, the appraiser may surprise us in a different way. He may reverse the common estimate. He lays down his magnifying glass, “This,” he says, “Is the real thing. It is priceless, it is of great value!”

There are many surprises when things are appraised. And there are even more surprises as our lives are appraised by God. Jesus told one parable in which God says to a man who had through all along that he had chosen the right values — "Fool! You lived your life on the wrong principles. All the time you thought your life was successful, but in reality, it is a failure.” None of us wants that kind of final appraisal made of our lives.

In this life, not only are our lives being continually appraised by God, but all of us are appraisers at the same time. We are everyday putting high values on some things and lower values on others.

In our scripture reading this morning from the Gospel of MATTHEW, Jesus gave a memorable picture of two appraisers at work, people who knew comparable values. Listen!

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of find pearls, who on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Jesus Christ knew the difficulty in making true appraisals. In his life he made tow grand appraisals. The first was in the midst of his temptations as he was beginning his ministry. The tempter said to him — “Here is the pearl of great price, the kingdoms of this world. You can be famous. You can be sensational. You can get people to follow you if you feed them.” Jesus appraised the so-called treasure carefully. It was worth nothing! Nothing in comparison to a higher value, doing the will of God. He made his second great appraisal as he faced the cross. The world of human beings needing to be saved was worth everything. He appraised it so highly that he gave his life as a ransom for all of us. He had found the pearl of great value and gave all to obtain it.

But now let's look at ourselves. Life for us can be described as a lifelong shopping trip. Thank of the world as a globe-shaped department store. We choose. There are glittering baubles which look valuable but are worth nothing in the long run and there are pearls of great value. The high art of life is to be able to tell the difference. We all face the danger of settling for cheap things which we think are valuable.

With the great prizes of life, ours for the asking, we are liable to end up with a toy balloon for which we have paid everything. The things upon which we sometimes place the highest value are silly. An old man told me this story from his college days. "When he was in college," he said, "the dormitory burned and, in the dormitory, lived the biggest and strongest man in the senior class. At the last minute he had gone back to the closet off his bedroom in order to salvage a bag of hickory nuts that has broken and spilled over the floor. We got him our just before the roof fell in."

So many people go through life and put the highest value on a broken bag of hickory nuts. If you don't believe it, read the letters to "Dear Abby," or "Dear Ann."

DEAR ABBY: We live in one of the best neighborhoods in town. There is not one house on our block worth less than $75,000. Some next neighbors moved in next door, and I understand they brought the house for the asking price and paid cash. They seem very nice, but they are weird. The first thing we noticed was that they didn't have a television antenna, so my little boy asked their little boy about it, and he was told they didn't have a television set! They have only one car and a two-car garage and the father drives the car to work every day. The children and mother all use the bus. They rarely go anywhere except to church. The wife doesn't have any fancy clothes or jewelry or furs. The children aren't permitted to have any toys dealing with war or violence? Could they belong to some offbeat religious cult? What do you make of them? CURIOUS.

DEAR CURIOUS: Maybe they've just got cash, conservative standards, high moral principles and pacifistic ideals. They sound like ideal neighbors to me.

It's a difficult art, this practice of appraising. Some blundering estimates are made. Jesus mentioned the most appalling one of all — "What shall it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit his or her soul."

So that we can be better appraisers, here are some clues which our Christian faith gives in helping us to determine the true values in this life.

1. First of all, any good appraiser knows that true value is often hidden. It is not always at first apparent. We can be fooled by surface appearances. Something that is old and dusty and looks worthless can be quite valuable once we get beneath the surface. On the other hand, something which looks quite good on the surface can be almost worthless otherwise.

As a young boy I remember going with my father when he was selling farm machinery. In those days he would often take horses in trade for a new tractor. The horses offered in trade had to be appraised even though frequently they looked like fine animals. My dad however was not fooled by surface appearance. He would always look inside the horses' mouth to examine the teeth and thereby determine the age and knowing the age he could more accurately appraise the true value of the animal.

Recently the New Yorker Magazine reprinted a note enclosed with a paint scraper from the Thompson Tool Company of Norwalk, Connecticut. In a message from the president of the company, we first hear his concern lest people paint over any wood or metal that is rotten or corroded at the core. Then came his second concern as he made a spiritual application of the same principle — "Have you ever noticed how some people try to reform their lives simply by glossing over the surface, trying to fool others with a thin veneer of phoniness?"

Again, the careful appraiser looks beneath the surface knowing that the true value of any object or person or goad in life is not always at first apparent. It may be hidden beneath the surface. It may be rotten, or it may be of much more value that the surface appearance indicates. In our day and age when there is so much emphasis on packaging, on surface appearance, don't be fooled by the packaging. True value is often hidden!

In the same way, the parables which Jesus told tell us that the Kingdom of God is often hidden. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field." God's kingdom is not always immediately obvious. No doubt many people stumble onto God's kingdom and do not recognize it for what it is. Look at the person of Jesus Christ. Born in a stable and died on a cross. Is that what God is like? God comforting the weeping, blessing the children, laying his hands on the despairing, healing the sick, forgiving the sinners, defending the poor. God's kingdom is often where we least expect it to be, and we may miss it unless we are careful appraisers and know what to look for.

2. Secondly, being a good appraiser is not enough. When the person found the treasure hidden in the field and knew its true value, noticed that he sold all that he had in order to obtain the treasure. As far as life is concerned merely being an excellent appraiser is not enough. Once a person finds the true purpose, one must also be willing take the risk to obtain it.

There was a rich young ruler who came to Jesus and after talking with Jesus was able to make the correct appraisal that to follow the way of Jesus Christ was of ultimate value==but he wouldn't take the risk.

Many are the individuals who know the right values but are unwilling to make the sacrifices for those values.

The Christian life always has in it this aspect of renunciation. The person in the parable was willing to give up almost everything that filled his life in order to gain the treasure he found hidden in the field. And he did this not with a long face and unhappiness but in joy went and sold all that he had to obtain the treasure.

Whatever is worth doing in life is going to cost us something, but the emphasis is not upon what we give up, but what we receive in return.

3. Thirdly, when we begin to appraise life and the things of life in the way in which God appraises them, when we find the treasure hidden in the field and give up what is necessary to obtain that treasure, then everything in our life begins to change. We begin to see the whole world with new and different eyes.

That's the way it always is; when we have found something altogether precious — a life partner, a friend, or a fulfillment in our life's work, then everything else gets measured by it and slips into its proper place. It is given its relative value. How differently the man in the parable looked at the whole field now that he knew the treasure was hidden in it. To ordinary eyes it

looked like all other fields, but he knew the secret that lay hidden in its soil. The eyes of the appraiser always see things we do not see.

So those of us who follow Jesus Christ begin to see the whole world and all of life in a new way. We now make a different appraisal of the world. We see value in things which before seemed to have no value. How different all of nature becomes — it is created by God and God made it all good. How different a sunrise or a sunset, how different our problems are.

We see all human beings in a new way. Now they are our brothers and sisters in the human race and not our enemies. No matter what the color of skin, no matter what the person's occupation, no matter what age, no matter what nationality, what political party, no matter whether rich or poor, male or female, we know Christ died for that person as much as Christ died for me. God loves that person as much as God loves me. That person is as valuable and precious as any other person in the world.

As Christians we appraise and judge all things with a new perspective. We look beyond surface appearance. We acquire the quiet eyes and the long view of those who no longer lose themselves in the fears and cares and hopes of all that runs across our daily path, but we know that God abides in the end when everything else fails. We no longer judge things and people and events as the world appraises them, but we begin to appraise all things through the eyes of Jesus Christ. Then we become people who can sing and praise and laugh where the world loses its nerve. Amen.