

# The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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Probably the most valuable thing that I have in my office here at St. Pascal's is something you wouldn't expect. I have a lot of good theology books in there, and a computer and a few pieces of religious art. But the most valuable thing is a small part of a piece of pottery, a jar. And to understand why it is precious I need to go back about 30 years. In the spring 1988, I spent a semester of my seminary training living and studying in Israel. One of the courses that I took there was called "Bible Archaeology," and it involved traveling all over the country to various places—usually ruins—where important events in the Sacred Scripture happened. And at every one of those sites was what was called a Tel. A Tel is just a mound of old debris that is left over from where a town once was, before it was invaded and annihilated by a foreign army. Most of those places had been destroyed numerous times over the course of centuries, and with each new conquest the Tels got bigger. By digging down into a Tel, history comes to life for the explorer. You can find ancient coins, or stone implements or household furnishings. But mostly what you find are pot shards. They are everywhere. Millions and millions of tiny shattered remains of pottery that people who lived thousands of years ago used for cups or storage or whatever. And most of them are about the size of a nickel or, maybe if you're lucky, a quarter.

One day that semester our class went to Tel Beer Sheba...another pile of rubble in the desert south of Jerusalem. I was so bored with the lecture that I wandered away and walked around the Tel. That place is mentioned 33 times in the Old Testament, as a place where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all spoke to God. I was kicking around some debris in the dirt and sand, and suddenly I saw a piece of pottery that was many times larger than any pot shard I'd ever seen before. I was curious, so I picked it up, and there on the underside was what was obviously part of a handle of a jug. I kept poking around and I kept finding more and more pieces of the same vessel. Eventually I collected them and glued the pieces together, and here's what I've got [holds up artifact]. I'm not sure, but as best I can tell, this thing dates to about the time of Jesus, which was the last time that particular settlement was destroyed. Somebody who lived 2,000 years ago made this, and used it in their home. That's amazing.

So why am I sharing this story and this artifact? Because I had learned to recognize it for what it is, and its value, and its rare, precious witness to history. I suspect that if anybody else saw this thing in a trash can today, they wouldn't care. And that's just exactly what today's gospel is about. This flurry of parables from Jesus is attempting to tell his followers what the Kingdom of Heaven is like...like a buried treasure in a field, like a fine pearl of great price, like a great catch of fish from the sea, like the head of a household sorting through items old and new from a storeroom. In every instance, what is required of the disciple is the ability to recognize what actually is valuable, and to be able to distinguish it from what is junk. There are lots of things that can be found in the dirt if you dig around. Most of it is worthless. And only a trained pearl merchant can tell a great or valuable one from a fraud. And only an experienced fisherman can separate a valuable catch from the bottom-feeders. And only someone who has lived in the house can determine what is valuable from that which is garbage when they do an inventory of the storeroom.

There are lots of shiny things, big new things, that seem at once to be worthy of our admiration—but are not. And there are lots of old things that seem to be of value just because they are old—but are not. Some old things are just that—worn out and no longer useful.

You have to know enough to understand what you are looking at, in order to understand whether it is of value or not. I had wandered around enough piles of dirt by the time I got to Tel Beer Sheba in Israel to know when I

was looking at an extraordinary and valuable piece of pottery...this one. Somebody who had never been to a Tel probably wouldn't have any idea. And the biggest fish that I have ever seen brought out of a lake was a monster carp at Lake Harriet in Minneapolis. Enormous, but a fisherman would understand that it was worthless, even destructive, maybe.

So to be a disciple of Jesus requires that we first come to understand what we are looking for, so that when we find it we can distinguish it from all the other shiny and new things that are crying out for our attention (or the old and decrepit things that are doing that, too!) We can only do that by knowing Christ. It requires a relationship, a living-with, a training of our eyes to see and ears to hear and to know what is truly of lasting value.

Lots of what our culture thinks of as important and new is really nothing at all. And lots of what our culture thinks of as venerable and traditional is really just dead. It is the responsibility of us Christians to know what to look for that is of value, and to rejoice when we find it, and to make it the center of our quest for the Kingdom of God. We need to be able to see, in a bit of old pottery, something priceless and rare and good.