

What Do You Treasure?  
 Matthew 13:44-46, 51-53  
 July 26, 2020

Today we consider a couple parables that Jesus told. It has been estimated that at least 1/3 of Jesus' teachings are parables. Today's parables come from Matthew 13. There are seven parables in Matthew 13 alone. Today we will consider only two! I thought you would appreciate that!

In the beginning of the chapter, we learn that Jesus came out of a house and sat beside the sea in order to teach. But the crowd was so great that he had to get in a boat and sit down, and teach as the multitude gathered on the beach.

The word "parable" comes from the Greek word parabole, which means to place alongside another thing for purposes of comparison. It places a known thing beside an unknown thing so that we may learn. A parable often starts out by using the word "like" by way of analogy. The kingdom is "like" a buried treasure, a pearl of great value, a mustard seed or a lost coin.

Most importantly, a parable usually illustrates a spiritual meaning by making reference to earthly objects. Jesus uses these images from everyday life so the Galileans were sure to understand, and we can too. Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; 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 fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

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Let me say upfront that I know some people have a problem with the word "kingdom" today. I know from talking with other pastors in Marin during lectionary study groups that this is a tough one for many people in Marin. How can we reframe it? The term is frequently used in the teachings of Jesus.

But let's understand that kingdom can be used in different ways. It doesn't have to refer only to heaven, and it doesn't have to be otherworldly. It doesn't have to mean that a heavenly king is going to come back to earth and set up a royal monarchy.

For me it means the fullness of God's inner dwelling within each one of us. That fullness is not only within us and around us. Maybe it helps to think of the kingdom as the indwelling of the divine spirit. As it says in Acts, "In God we live, and move, and have our being." That is the fullest expression of God's kingdom for me. So let's not get too caught up in language that refers to the age of feudalism with kings and Lords and subjects. That would make these verses too easy to dismiss and irrelevant for today.

These two parables today are a pair, and sometimes are called the parables of joy, because both tell us about joyful people – people who have found something wonderful and are thrilled at the prospect of possessing it.

In the first of these, a man finds a treasure hidden in a field. That would not have been terribly unusual in those days. There were no banks. There were no safes or security deposit boxes. The best way to safeguard your money and valuables was to hide them.

I am reminded of a story of my grandfather. He didn't trust banks. He wasn't about to hand his hard earned money over to someone else! So he hid his money under a mattress! Seriously. Well, this worked for a while. But one night their house caught on fire. They were lucky to get down from their second story house with their lives. But their life savings was gone.

Same thing could have happened to people in biblical times. They could not lock their doors securely while working in the fields. The best way to safeguard things like gold and jewels was to bury them in the ground -- being careful to remember where they were.

But things happened. A woman might die without ever revealing where she had hidden her money. A man might be called suddenly to war and never return. Nobody would know where to look for the valuables. A year later -- or ten years later -- or a hundred years later -- someone would find the money. Sometimes it took even longer, or the treasure went unclaimed.

So a man found treasure hidden in a field. Suddenly he was rich! The rule was simple: finders-keepers, losers-weepers -- the person who found the money got to keep it. Except the person who owned the land might be upset if someone went digging around in his field. Word would soon spread that someone "stole" the treasure that was hidden in the owner's field. So the man sold all he had in order to buy the field. But he didn't mind.

Jesus says that this man -- "in his joy" sold everything that he had to get the money to buy the field. It would be sort of like trying to buy a house in Marin today – you do everything you can to dredge up all your resources in order to buy it! We should know. We just did it!

The man didn't grumble about the inconvenience of selling his possessions or the high cost of the field. In his joy, he sold everything so that he could buy the field.

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The second parable is similar. Jesus says that a merchant found one pearl of especially great value. Like the first man, he went and sold everything he had to get money to buy the great pearl from the local jeweler. We don't know what he had in mind. Perhaps he just wanted the status of owning a great and expensive pearl. Perhaps he could see himself

standing before the king -- offering the pearl to the king for a king's ransom. Whatever his motives, he acted *quickly*, just like the first man. He sold everything he had so that he might buy the great pearl.

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When Jesus used parables, he was doing more than telling stories. He wants us to apply it to our own lives. The art of the parable was known for catching the hearers unaware, or turning conventional wisdom upside down. There was a certain “shock” value intended most of the time.

Today, Jesus might say, “So you. What about you! I am talking to you!” And we pause and get embarrassed and have difficulty finding our words. “Why . . . why, I haven’t really thought about it I guess,” might be our response. It gives us pause to reflect.

Where are you finding treasure these days? Have you been digging around for answers? Have you spent any time searching for pearls of wisdom? As someone said, you’ll probably never have more time than you do right now!

How is your spirit? Is it a little dry? Maybe it could use some refreshing water? Is your cup full, or could it use the zest of a little new wine? We all approach our spiritual lives in different ways. That is the beauty of the parable. There is no one right way to interpret them. I was probably a little too dogmatic early in my ministry about what some of those ways might be. But there are many roads that lead to blessings. Jesus wants us to use our imaginations.

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Here are a few of my personal reflections and observations. I hope you are doing some journaling these days and reflecting on some of yours. I encourage everyone to look for treasure during these challenging days of the pandemic.

We just lost a national treasure in John Lewis, but his work continues. Speaking of treasure, I remember seeing violinists play from their balconies in Italy during the early days of the virus. Soon other musicians joined them and it sounded like an orchestra. Opera singers sang from their windows. You have no doubt seen clips of singers synchronized as they shared in joyful song. People are creative. People are compassionate. These are no small things. Some of you have said how much you enjoy working in your gardens, and that has been a big factor in helping you through the pandemic. These are treasures. It is the stuff of parables.

Recently I read a letter to the editor in the NYT written by a black woman. She lives in a small rural town in the Midwest. She said she treasured the fact that the Black Lives Matter movement has spread to so many small rural towns for the first time in anybody’s memory. She was moved to tears, and she noted that many of the protests were organized by white people. She is a treasure and she is finding treasure.

Anthony Fauci is a national treasure. It feels like he has become a member of the family, in our living room so often on the nightly news. He not only reports on the latest numbers, but he is often a source of optimism and encouragement. Besides, I like the fact that he is usually seen wearing a facemask with the design of the Washington Nationals baseball team! Have you noticed?

Speaking of baseball, I have treasured baseball for nearly 60 years, and it has been a source of hope and joy for me that the abbreviated season started this past week! Baseball and summertime have been synonymous in our house. The days of the week are noted by who my team is playing. If they are playing a doubleheader, it must be Sunday! In the midst of the pandemic, a small dose of normality has returned, if only for a couple months. America needs baseball to get its' mind off itself.

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As a final thought, if I may return to the parables for a minute, it occurred to me recently that what if the subject and object of the two parables today was reversed? What if God looks at YOU and sees YOU as a great treasure and a pearl of great price? What if God were to say, "I will do everything I can to instill all of the wisdom of the universe and a full measure of compassion into a woman and a man?"

If God were totally outlandish, we might discover that God instilled into Jesus the fullest nature of God and humanity into one person. How scandalous such an idea has been throughout history! This could happen not for purposes of salvation so much, but in the interest of full revelation.

So go ahead. Dig around a bit and get your hands dirty. You might be surprised at what treasure you find. Amen

## The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price

Matthew 13:44-46, 51-53

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls.

46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

51 "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked. "Yes," they replied.

52 He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

53 When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there.