

The Great Treasure
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Matthew 13:44-46 (NRSV)

"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.

[45] "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; [46] on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

A TALKING GREYHOUND

Renowned preacher, theology professor and storyteller Fred Craddock swears this happened to him: He was visiting in a home of one of his former students after graduation, and after a great dinner, the young parents excused themselves and hustled the kids off to bed, leaving Fred in the living room with the family pet—a large, sleek greyhound. Earlier in the evening Fred had watched the kids roll on the floor playing with the family dog.

"That's a full-blooded greyhound there," the father of the kids had told Fred. "He once raced professionally down in Florida. Then we got him. Great dog with the kids, that greyhound."

Well, sitting there with the dog, the dog turned to Fred and asked, "This your first visit to Connecticut?"

"No," Fred answered. "I went to school up here a long time ago."

"Well, I guess you heard. I came up here from Miami," said the greyhound.

"Oh, yeah, you retired?" Fred said.

"No, is that what they told you? No, no, I didn't retire. I tell you, I spent 5 years as a professional, racing greyhound. That means 5 years of running around that track day after day, seven days a week with others chasing that rabbit.

Well, one day, I got up close; I got a good look at that rabbit. It was a fake! I had spent my whole life chasing a fake rabbit! Hey, I didn't retire; I quit!"

CHASING FAKE RABBITS

I'm concerned about preachers who tell stories about talking dogs! But, maybe there is some truth to this story; that part about the fake rabbit.

I've met people who've retired from chasing fake rabbits. I went to seminary with one. He wasn't a greyhound. This man was a contractor from Alabama. He worked hard every day of the week. In fact, he said that he was pouring his life into his work.

But, one day he got up and said to no one in particular, "Why am I doing this? What does this all mean?" The answer was that it didn't mean much. So he decided to do something crazy. He gave up his high paying job and went to seminary.

Norm must have been my age or even older when he entered school. It was a struggle. As he put it, "Greek didn't take on the first try." Indeed, I remember several frustrating days trying to teach him enough to pass the final exam on the second or third try!

But, Norm was never unhappy. In fact he was one of the happiest students at the school. He looked like a man who had found a great treasure. He was assured of God's call. He was quite willing to give it all up for this one thing.

THE SHARECROPPER

I wonder if Norm might have been a bit like the man in our Scripture lesson for today. He was a hard worker too, just like Norm. He was plowing a field one day, somebody else's field, and he hears the plow hit something. He bends down, brushes some dirt off of what turns out to be a chest and finds a treasure buried in the field.

In those days when the land was forever being conquered by some army, the prudent householder gathered the family valuables and hid them in a field for safekeeping. There was no Nationsbank in Jerusalem in those days so burial in the ground was your safest bet.

After things calmed down, you could go back and retrieve your valuables ... assuming, of course, that things did calm down and that you could remember where you buried your valuables before someone else happened upon them.

But, as later discoveries have indicated (even some in this century), a few people did forget where their valuables were buried or perhaps they were killed when the invading army came through their land. This was probably the case with the treasure found by the sharecropper.

But, there was just one problem. Unclaimed buried treasure was the property of the new land owner.

So, what does the man in the story do? He seeks to become the new land owner

He quickly covers the treasure up, sells everything he has and makes the owner of the field an offer that he can't refuse.

"How much would you like for that worthless old rocky, barren field out there? Call me crazy, but I'd like to buy it?"

A PARABLE

Now some of you might be worried about this story from an ethical standpoint. Wasn't the sharecropper under some obligation to tell his employer the truth about why he wanted the field? Yes, but that's not the point of the story.

Remember this is a parable about the kingdom of heaven. We shouldn't analyze it in minute detail. There is just one main point to be made.

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like this sharecropper who found a treasure in a field. And how is the kingdom of heaven like the treasure?

The kingdom is like this treasure because it is something precious that we often find in the most unexpected place. We wake up one morning and suddenly realize that our priorities are all wrong. There is more to life than the life we have been living.

When that happens, all bets are off.
It's time for a yard sale and a road trip with Jesus.

A GREAT TREASURE

That's how it happened with his first disciples you know. Jesus said "follow me," and those practical, hard working fishermen dropped their nets and followed Jesus. They walked away from family, friends and home, and for what?

It was crazy. The only reward they seemed to get for their devotion was persecution and an untimely death. And yet, they continued to follow him.

Down through the years new disciples have heard the call of Jesus; they have found a treasure in an unlikely place and have given up everything in order that they might have the one great thing. In Jesus they found the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price.

We will not dedicate ourselves totally to the kingdom of God until we get a glimpse of how great that treasure can be. When we do get a glimpse of that kingdom, our values change. We give up things that we used to treasure. We are filled with joy and anticipation.

It's like finding treasure in a field, a pearl of great price or winning the lottery. But, it's much greater than that.

There will come a time when the winnings from the lottery will do you no good. There will come a time when the pearl of great price will belong to someone else. There will come a time when even the greatest treasure will return to the field from whence it came.

But, the kingdom of God is of lasting value. Remember what Jesus said about true treasure? "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys." Luke 12:33

Jesus said something similar to the rich young ruler who wanted to follow him. In response to the young man's request Jesus said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Mark 10:21

The young man wasn't willing to take that kind of risk. He was afraid of selling off everything in order to gain true treasure. He went away sad.

What might God want us to sell off or give up this week? I dare say that all of us are called to give up something. Whatever is getting in the way of our service to the kingdom, it is not worth making us miss out on the treasure that is not changed by time or circumstance.

RISK AVERSION

Strangely enough, a faith that was founded by those who were willing to risk everything for the one great thing has evolved into a religion for those who want safety first, last and always. In many cases, the church has become the great haven for a settled, "buttoned down" way of life.

An Episcopal priest was thinking about buying a motorcycle. A salesman, looking lovingly over a rocket-like motorcycle, said, "Now, this baby can go from zero to 80 in nothing flat. Nobody can touch you when you are on this baby."

Then the salesman asked, "And what do you do for a living?"

The pastor admitted that he was clergy. And the salesman said, "Uh, this is a very, very safe motorcycle you got here."

How strange that the world should see us in this way. How strange that many of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus should be this way. The kingdom of God is all about bungee jumping and extreme sports. The kingdom of God is about riding the big wave.

But, the risks we take are for more than a big thrill. The risks we take are for the biggest payoff of all, life in the kingdom of heaven. There is a treasure to be found in following Jesus, but it is hidden treasure, a treasure that is buried in the rocky soil of what seems like the ordinary and everyday.

Don't be fooled. Be alert to the possibilities. Be prepared.

YEAR ROUND ADVENT

Someone once said that they wished the joy and good will of Christmas could be with us all year long. The joy and good will of Christmas does make for a beautiful postcard, but I would nominate the season that comes before it as my favorite time of the year. Advent, the season of great expectations is at the core of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

I know. Three quarters of the Christian community doesn't even celebrate Advent, and that's a shame because getting ready for the coming of the kingdom is half the battle.

John the Baptist had but one message, "Get ready for the kingdom of God is at hand." Jesus, in many ways, had a similar message. "You never

know when you're going to run across that great treasure in the field that pearl of great price. Be ready to sell everything and follow me."

RISK AND GROWTH

Over the years I have found that a church's ability to do ministry well is often connected to its willingness to take risks. A church that is willing to take risks is more likely to grow in the grace and knowledge of God. And a church that is unwilling to take risks often finds itself stagnating.

A telltale sign of a church that is not willing to take risks can be found in what we talk about in our meetings. If we have meetings that go on into the night as folks heatedly debate the color of the new carpet in the sanctuary, friends we are in trouble. How does that old saying go? We're rearranging the deck furniture on the Titanic.

Several years ago I heard that if the membership loss continued in the Presbyterian Church at the current rate, we would cease to exist in the year 2027. I'm not sure about the current projections but apparently they are pretty bleak.

The Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church sent a "pastoral letter" to all the churches urging us to "try harder" in our efforts to gain new members and retain our old members. As a denomination we are still going very much in the wrong direction.

Some have responded to that alarming trend by trying a number of different programs and projects. Some have worked. Many have not.

Perhaps we are relying too much on who we are and what we can do and not enough on the treasure that God can reveal to us.

We cannot bring in the kingdom under our own steam. There must be a sense of humility and a willingness to give up everything for the sake of God's kingdom.

THY KINGDOM COME

Every week people all over the world are praying the same thing. When they repeat the Lord's Prayer they say, "Thy kingdom come."

It seems so obvious and yet it bears repeating. What is this kingdom that we are praying for? It is God's kingdom. We are praying for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

It is obvious from this very familiar prayer that the kingdoms of this earth cannot be equated with God's kingdom, and that includes some kingdoms that we hold very dear to our hearts, the kingdoms of family, friends, country and even the kingdom that we call church.

God's kingdom cannot be equated with any of these.

In a way the kingdom of heaven remains beneath the surface, a deeper meaning and hope that is just beyond our reach. The kingdom is a pearl

of great price that must be sought all of our life. It is an unexpected treasure that will cost us everything and give us everything that is really important.

One preacher defined the kingdom of heaven in this way. He said, "The kingdom of heaven is the joy of remembering that relationships matter more than things. It is deliverance when the storms of life are raging. It is confidence that Christians never say goodbye; that we will see our loved ones again.

The kingdom of heaven is the gift of immortality and perfection, which we cannot attain in our own strength. The kingdom of heaven is the assurance that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."

If ever there was a treasure worth pursuing, this is it.

A FUNERAL

Several weeks ago I attended a funeral for one of my fellow pastors, Bob Frost. I didn't really know him all that well, but one of my New Year's resolutions was to attend these funerals as a show of respect and solidarity. There were many people in attendance, including a good number of my fellow ministers.

Four or five of Bob's best friends were ministers, and they flew in from around the Southeast to lead the service. One told of an incident that took place when Bob was taking a course at Columbia Seminary's extension program in the Orlando area.

He was a successful attorney and even at that time was getting a bit on the older side. He asked this fellow student who was also advancing in years, "What in the world are we doing here at our age? This is crazy."

His friend had no answer.
It didn't make any sense to him either.

But, they both quit their jobs and finished their schooling at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Years later Bob was able to get a pastorate at the First Presbyterian Church of Apopka.

He obviously knew by that time why God had called him to leave the old life and come to that place. Though he had colon cancer and less than a year to live, Bob continued to work as a pastor ... visiting the sick and dying, preaching the Good News each week.

I think that those last months may have been the most effective months of Bob's career as a pastor.

It was the custom in that church for people to say just a few brief words about the dearly departed as a way of paying tribute.

Member after member gave tribute to Bob for all he had done for them during the last days of his life. One remark in particular was very touching.

The church member said with tears flowing down his face, "Bob Frost helped me bury my mother this past April. He was the most courageous person I have ever known."

Bob Frost at one time wondered why God had called him to do something "crazy" like become a pastor. But, on that day it didn't seem so crazy any more.

That day as I looked at that church full of ministers and friends I felt truly inspired. We truly were stewards of a great treasure. I knew that all of us in that place, from time to time, felt like what we did went unnoticed and unappreciated.

But, there will come a time when the hidden treasure of the gospel will be revealed to all people. There will come a time when we will all appreciate what a priceless pearl we have in this message we call gospel. There will come a time when the servants of the Lord will join hand in hand and give thanks for a life filled with meaning and hope.

The kingdom of God is like that.

As the Apostle Paul put it,

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." I
Corinthians 13:12

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN