

Parable of the Treasure and the Pearl

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Matthew 13:44-46

Sermon Series: The Kingdom of God

This treasure parable amounts to a single verse. It's like my hometown. Blink and you miss it!

Amanda Reece bought an 83-year-old house in suburban Cleveland. It was a classic fixer-upper. She hired a contractor, Bob Kitts, to do the work for her. Bob was ripping plaster from the bathroom wall studs when he found a stack of \$50 bills, wrapped in pre-World War II Cleveland Plain Dealer newspaper. He called Amanda to leave work immediately. Together they pulled more money from the wall, \$182,000, to be exact. The currency was in excellent condition. In the stack were rare, 1929 series dollar Federal Reserve Bank Notes worth \$85 each, as well as \$500 and \$1000 dollar bills. One currency appraiser assessed its total value at a half million dollars.

The owner's name on the wrapper, Peter Dunne, was a businessman who lived in the house during the depression era. He died unmarried and childless.

The euphoria over the discovery was short-lived. Amanda, the owner, offered Bob, the contractor, a 10 percent finder's fee. Bob countered with a 50/50 split. Now, the two speak only through their attorneys.

You could argue the case both ways. It was Amanda's house, but then again, Bob found it. Bob's attorneys have dusted off an obscure law called treasure trove that is more commonly associated

with sunken treasure found on high seas than buried treasure in suburban neighborhoods. It essentially argues a finder's fee provision as long as the finder has permission to be there. Amanda's attorney likens this arcane law to a weird bar exam question.

This story came to mind as I read this treasure parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in the field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sell all that he has and buys that field" (Matthew 13:44).

On previous Sundays, we explored several lengthy agricultural parables about sowing seed. This treasure parable amounts to a single verse. It's like my hometown. Blink and you miss it!

There were no F.D.I.C. insured banks in those days or safety deposit boxes to store your valuables. The safest place to store your treasure was in a strongbox or jar buried in a field. You just had to remember where you stored it.

The farmhand in the story uncovers this treasure as he tills the soil. We're not told who originally owned this treasure. Maybe the previous owner forgot where he buried it or died before he could reveal its whereabouts to his next-of-kin. This farmhand immediately recognizes this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He invests everything he owns to buy the field.

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Some of you question the propriety of keeping the treasure secret from the owner until the farmhand buys the land. Remember what we said in previous Sundays about parables. Parables are not intended to have multiple meanings; they make one essential point. Jesus is not interested in debating the ethics of the situation. His point is to illustrate the incomparable value of the kingdom.

If you find something for sale at a yard sale for \$5 that you know is worth \$500, are you required to tell the owner what the item is really worth? No, the “finders keepers” axiom applies to yard sales etiquette. You can slap down a five-spot in good conscience and call it a deal.

To set the record straight, this man is within his legal rights to buy the field. In rabbinic law, “If a man finds scattered money, it belongs to the finder.”

The pearl of great price parable is a close cousin to this hidden treasure story. “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went away and sold everything that he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:45-46).

In Jesus' day, pearls held the place of distinction that diamonds do now. The emphasis of this parable, like the earlier one, is on the value of the discovery. The merchant sold all that he had to obtain this pearl of great value.

Both parables teach that the kingdom of God has value. God's kingdom has incomparable value,

like hidden treasure or the pearl of great value.

Paul writes, “We have this treasure in jars of clay” (2 Corinthians 4:7). Jesus Christ is the greatest treasure. We have made the once-in-a-lifetime discovery that God offers the world something unique in Jesus Christ.

If the kingdom of God has such immeasurable value, why aren't more people investing in it? More people aren't investing because the kingdom of God goes unrecognized. In both the buried treasure and pearl of great value parables, the kingdom of God is hidden.

Now, God doesn't deliberately hide the kingdom from people. We're simply not looking for it.

I take the same route home every day. I've traversed the same route back and forth for the past 23 years. I've taken this same trip thousands of times, yet I can't, for the life of me, identify some of its street names or obvious road markings. The reason is rather clear: I'm simply not looking for street names or road markings on my way home.

In like fashion, we've got to be looking for God to see God.

Chris and I were in the market for a certain make and model of car a few years ago. We never realized how many cars of the same make and model were on the highway until we intentionally started looking for them. Suddenly, we saw this make and model of car everywhere.

Last year, one of the world's great violinists played at the entrance to the L'Enfant Plaza Metro station during rush hour. The

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Washington Post wanted to know whether, in a banal setting, at an inconvenient time, anyone would recognize the talent of this world class musician.

Joshua Bell was dressed one January morning last year in nondescript jeans, T-shirt and a Washington Nationals cap. He began playing his million dollar 1713 Stradivari violin. He left his violin case open to accept donations. He played six classical selections over the next 45 minutes. Only three days earlier, Joshua had filled Boston's Symphony Hall, where patrons shelled out \$100 or more for the chance to hear him play.

Would anyone recognize this master at the metro? He played for six minutes before anyone bothered to stop and listen. In a span of 45 minutes, seven people actually stopped to hear him play. One thousand, seventy people passed by, oblivious to one of the great violinists in the world. For someone who plays for \$1000 per minute, the total amount left in his case was \$32.17.

Like the people at L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station, some of us are oblivious to the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God has come near, but we don't notice.

These two parables are different in one respect. In the first parable, the farmhand stumbles upon the treasure quite by accident. In the second parable, the merchant finds what he is looking for. Some stumble onto the kingdom of God. Others go looking for it.

I discovered God almost by accident at age 19. I was, by all accounts, a typical college student. I liked to have a good time; we'll just leave it at that. I was home for the summer, attending an outdoor party. My friend's parents weren't home, so the beer flowed freely. Someone that night invited me to a Bible study. It was issued as something of a dare. I took him up on it. This seemingly fluke invitation initiated a series of events that led me to where I am today.

Once I attended that Bible study, I became like the merchant in the parable looking for this pearl of great value. When I started looking for the kingdom of God, suddenly I found this kingdom everywhere.

If God's kingdom has this much value, it's worth our investment. The farmhand and merchant sold all they had to buy what was valuable. If the kingdom has this much value, it's worth any investment of time and money to find it.

The reflection question in last Tuesday's Kingdom Calling devotional with regard to this pearl-of-great-value parable is spot-on: Does your pursuit of God and desire to share Him with others reflect a similar sense of value and urgency?

Justin was a 2nd century professor who had tried all the philosophical schools and remained unsatisfied. One day, he met an old man in a field who told him about Jesus. He immediately began reading the Bible to see if this was true. He became a committed Christian, even though it led to his martyrdom. He had found the treasure of incom-

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parable worth and the pearl of great price.

Don't Waste Your Life is the title of a book written by John Piper. There is one section of the book where Piper becomes intensely personal:

“As I write this, I am 57-years-old. As the months go by, I relate more and more to people who are young enough to be my sons and daughters. You may be in that category. I have four sons and one daughter. Few things, if any, fill me with more longing these months and years than the longing that my children not waste their lives on fatal success.

“This longing transfers very easily to you, especially if you are in the 20s or 30s. I see you, as it were, like a son or a daughter, and I plead with you as a father—perhaps a father who loves you dearly, or the father you never had. Or the father who never had a vision for you like I have for you—and God has for you. Or the father who has a vision for you, but it's all about money and statues—I plead with you: Desire that your life count for something great. Long for your life to have eternal significance! Want this! Don't coast through life without a passion.”

This section of Piper's book struck me because I, too, am 57-years-old. I, too, have a son and daughter. Like Piper, my heart, as well, beats for young people in the next generation.

On a day when we confirm 43 young people into the membership of this church, I plead with you. If

the kingdom has this much value, it's worth any investment of time and money to find it.

Long for your life to have eternal significance! Want this! Don't coast through life without a passion.

