

Joyful Surrender

Psalm 145:8-17 Matthew 13:44-46

Note: Today we will finish the series on the parables of Matthew 13. I'm going to continue with parables after Easter. Next week there will be a terrific guest preacher, Rev. Adrienne Schlosser-Hall, and then during Lent I'm going to have a special sermon series which... I'll tell you about on the first Sunday of Lent!

This morning we're looking at two small parables at the end of a string of several parables in Matthew 13. In all of these parables Jesus is talking about what the Kingdom of God is, or is like. It's an organic, dynamic, growing, active, living reality made up of people who are willing to be part of what God is doing in the world—which, as we have seen, is work that starts small, is often hidden, and mysterious. And as we are going to see today, it has great worth.

⁴⁴"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.

This is the word of the Lord.

Have you ever stumbled across something of value?

I have an old friend who tried on a pair of jeans at a Goodwill store, and found a \$20 bill in one of the inner pockets. He bought the jeans so he could get the \$20. He didn't need to buy the jeans; he was in the dressing room and could've just put the \$20 in his other pants pocket, but he was so surprised and happy to find the money he just bought the jeans. Even though they didn't fit him. They were too big. But he wore them anyway, just for the fun of it. In his joy, he bought the jeans...

From time to time much greater discoveries are made: in 1946 a Shepherd boy looking for a stray sheep throws a rock into a cave (to try to scare the sheep out) and hears a shattering noise. He goes in and finds many jars which contained these things we now call the Dead Sea scrolls. What a discovery!

A few years ago, divers off the Florida coast locate a sunken 17th-century Spanish vessel, and among the treasures aboard they find a gold ring valued at \$500,000. We dream of making a discovery like that.

And a farmer plowing his field in Suffolk, England struck a container, and upon opening it found that it held beautiful silver dishes dating from the late Roman empire, probably around the 4th century.

Jesus said: The kingdom of heaven is like a guy out in a field who accidentally stumbles upon buried treasure. The guy is ecstatic! He runs out and sells *everything he has* in order to buy that field, to make that treasure his. That discovery was accidental. He stumbled upon it.

Sometimes, though, the discovery is more deliberate & intentional. When someone is *seeking* the treasure. The kingdom of God, Jesus said, is like a merchant, a jeweler, who scours the earth in search of the perfect pearl, and when he finds it, he cashes in everything to obtain it.

Some are *searching* for the kingdom like the merchant, others *stumble upon it* like the guy in the field. I love this. It means that God gets peoples' attention in many ways: some are spiritual seekers, and some aren't seeking but something happens in their life, some serendipity, that triggers a discovery. But it doesn't really matter, in the end. What matters, Jesus is saying, is that when a person becomes aware of, or finds, the treasure that is God's kingdom, they *want that* reality, want to be a part of it *more than anything else*.

When we are faced with the unbelievable gift of Christ's redeeming grace, with the outrageous love of Christ that will never let us go, *we are so overjoyed* we'll do whatever it takes to make it ours! That's Jesus' point in these parables.

That's what these people *do* in the parables. They are so excited, so happy to find these treasures, they immediately go and sell everything they have to buy them. Because, it can be assumed, the treasure they discover is worth more to them than what they previously had. We could say, they're better off.

So the question put before us this morning is: what is the Kingdom worth to you? And to me? What is its value to you, and to me?

Note: along that line (of the Kingdom's worth/value), remember Jesus' wonderful, "Do not worry about your life..." teaching? You know, consider the lilies of the field, and the birds of the air—God takes care of them, so God will provide for you? Don't worry about tomorrow; you'll be taken care of today? We love that passage and those promises. At the end of that teaching, Jesus gives this final word of hope and promise; he says, "Do not be afraid, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you... the Kingdom." We are meant to hear that as the best thing in the world that someone could give us. "Seek first the Kingdom of God," Jesus says. And it'll be given to you. Not earned; given. We can each think about what the Kingdom means to us, and what it's worth to us. But Jesus is implying that, in his view, it's worth everything. So, why fuss over the small stuff.

Getting back to the parables in Matthew 13...

It's important to underscore the element of joy in these parables. The man in the field finds buried treasure, and then *in his joy* he goes and sells all he has and buys that field. It starts with JOY. Joy comes first. And it's easy to miss that. Jesus is underscoring the emotional element of this discovery. And the order is important: first comes the joy of discovery, then comes the selling of what they had, then the acquisition (of the treasure, the pearl). That's important because Jesus is telling us that the giving up of things isn't some painful act. Jesus did not say the kingdom of heaven is like a man who had to sell everything because he needed to go to the dentist for a root canal. No, the kingdom of heaven is such a great discovery that it elicits a *joyful* reaction and response.

Giving up everything for it is not drudgery. It's a joyful act. Who wouldn't want it!? So, these parables are exhibiting a joyful surrender. *Joyful* surrender.

God invites us to discover—or *rediscover*—the joy of the treasure that is the Kingdom—which isn't a place, but an *experience* of things like love, grace, healing, peace-receiving (and peace-giving), and our daily needs being met. And these parables describe whole-hearted responses, whole-life responses to the Kingdom, which begin with the joy of discovery.

And along with the joy of discovery, we can sense movement in these parables, can't we? I can sense, and picture, the treasure-finder and the pearl merchant hurrying, almost running to make their transactions. These parables convey a sense of kinetic energy!

And that "feel" of these parables seems to be asking us, what are you and I running toward? Where is our energy taking us?

Are we running toward the treasure of the Kingdom? Or maybe not running toward it, but simply desiring it? Or maybe if we don't feel like we desire it at the moment, at the very least we find ourselves resonating with the words Teresa of Avila, that 16th century nun, who once prayed: "O God, I don't love you right now. I don't even want to love you right now. *But I want to want to love you...*" Teresa of Avila is the one who, when she was going through a difficult stretch in her life, prayed, "God, if this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few of them." She never minced words with God! In this other prayer, though, she expresses her true desire: though I don't feel it at the moment, I want to want to love you. I appreciate how honest she is. Like all of the saints of old, and saints of contemporary times like Mother Teresa. After Mother Teresa died, we discovered in her journals that she sometimes felt like

God was so distant from her—or that she was distant from God. But she, like Teresa of Avila, chose to take steps toward God, seeking the Kingdom, wanting to want it. And she did experience moments of ecstatic joy.

I'm with the Teresa's! I'm invited to experience the joy of discovering the treasure of the kingdom, with the immensity of the gospel, with Jesus who announced the kingdom, and lived it and showed it—and I *want to want* to respond. I *want to want* to give my all. I *want to want* to joyfully surrender. Even if I don't feel the joy in certain moments, I can trust that the joy of discovery is there in the seeking.

Jesu says the Kingdom is like treasure. It *is* treasure, Jesus says. So, what makes the Kingdom a treasure? What makes it so great that with joy a person is willing to surrender everything?

1. Grace. In God's Kingdom we get to experience the heart of the King, which is a heart of love—the creator God paying loving attention to you and to me with renewing and healing presence and power. In God's kingdom there is freedom, and spiritual intimacy. And I know that word intimacy might sound a little too touchy-feely, and maybe even scary. Or what someone has called “Sloppy agape” (squishy and sentimental). But what I mean by

intimacy is, simply, God knowing me inside and out—and me knowing that God’s knowing of me is a safe and gracious experience because there is no condemnation. Only edification and affirmation, and a calling forth of my true self, in Jesus Christ. God, our King, is gracious. And the mark of his Kingdom is grace. That makes it a treasure.

2. The kingdom is also relationship. Think about this: God created the world and the universe with relationship as the building block.

The DNA of the world and the universe is relationship. Protons, neutrons, electrons form in relationship to each other to make atoms. And atoms combine with other atoms to make stuff. And there is inherent unity in our earth’s ecosystem—it’s a delicate balance. It was out of love that God created the physical world with an inherent relational unity. This is true of every part and piece of earth, and it’s also true in the outer universe. God has mirrored relationship in the very structure of the universe: planets in relationship to one another, galaxies in relationship. And, to bring it back home, people in relationship.

And this is true even in the godhead! We believe in a triune God, this mystery of three persons in community with one another. Not in hierarchy, but community.

There is an ancient, 5th or 6th century word that the early church used to describe this: perichoresis: peri=around, like in “perimeter;” and choresis=make room, or give way; it’s where we get the word “choreography”—movement, around one another. So perichoresis came to be defined by the early church as “divine choreography.” Or, divine dance. Of the Godhead making room for one another—in and around each other. This eternal relationship of self-giving, one to the other.

And we are invited into this! That’s what communion is about: divine union, or, union with the divine community.

Andrei Rublev’s icon: the Russian icon of the Trinity (show on screen). There is a lot going on here (and we could take an hour to discuss the detail and symbolism), but I want you to notice the little rectangle on the front of the table... It doesn’t really fit, and on the original it apparently had some kind of adhesive stuck to it. We’re not 100% sure why it’s there, but iconographers who study such things believe that when Rublev created this painting, he attached a mirror

there, so as you approach the painting you saw yourself... being drawn in, and part of, this divine community. Isn't that beautiful? We are invited to be part of the perichoresis. The divine choreography, the dance of community and communion. And relationship.

All of the gracious activity of the Godhead, by nature, is working toward unity and community: relationship. That's why the DNA of the Kingdom is reconciliation, healing, love, forgiveness. *Disunity* and division are the anti-matter of the Kingdom (to stay with the scientific analogy...).

This is why Paul says in Romans 8:28 that "all things *work together* for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose." That verse is not just for when you're having a bad day (I crashed the car: oh well, all things work together I guess...). No, Paul is saying that this is like a law of nature in the kingdom; it's like gravity. All... things... work... together... toward the good in God's Kingdom. Even when bad things happen. The Kingdom is relationships. Finally...

3. What makes the kingdom treasure is that, once drawn in, we get to be part of the triune God's mission of reconciliation on earth. We get to see lives changed, justice done, relationships reconciled; we get to plant seeds (in

keeping with last week's parables). Every person in God's Kingdom has great purpose, and is a participant in God's mission in the world!

Halleluiah, I get to be part of something bigger than me! Apart from Christ and the Kingdom, my limited worldview might be that everything is filtered through me. *My kingdom come, my will be done!* But in God's Kingdom we are called to partner with the King in *his* mission of grace and relationship.

Being part of the Kingdom is all gift, and, there is also an invitation and a calling, to be part of what God is doing in the world. In his second letter to the Corinthians (ch.5:17-f), the apostle Paul states that "God, in Christ, was reconciling the world to himself." And then he calls us "ambassadors for Christ" who have been "entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation." Think of that: we have been appointed as ambassadors! For God's Kingdom. To do reconciling work—peace-making work, justice work, unifying work.

Grace, relationship, mission. These are some of what make the Kingdom treasure. I'm sure you can think of more. Again these parables ask us: what is it worth to you?

Be Thou My Vision