

The Parables of the Treasure and the Pearl
Matthew 13:44-46
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Here are the parables of the Treasure in a Field and the Priceless Pearl from the gospel of Matthew chapter 13 verses 44 to 46.

‘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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

These are short but challenging parables. When we hear these words used by Jesus in explaining and teaching the disciples about the parables, we scratch our heads in wonder. Even the commentators could not agree on their understanding of these parables.

I grew up in California, and I think they must have been trying out new language rules at the time because I have never had an in-depth grasp on the different devices used in writing until later in life, so I am always interested in how they influence the reader – or hearer. Jesus and the writers of the gospels were skilled users of such devices to draw their hearers in and hold their attention. In Chapter 13 Matthew used a KATEENA – a rhetorical device used by rabbis that strung together one story after another with a common theme.

The stories are related in a stair step fashion, each saying amplifying the preceding one with a new piece of information, a slightly different perspective, or a fresh emotional force. The effect is cumulative. The last three parables – these two and the one following about the separation of the great catch summarize this collection of parables. To me this is not much of a summary. I want cliff notes that outline it all for me, but that is the beauty and pain of the parables of Jesus. The struggle is important.

These two parables are tough, though at first glance the message seems obvious. They are even more difficult when we try to make them fit into our present culture, to read them with strong 21st century eyes. Reading them for today makes us uncomfortable. They dare us to look beyond the typical. I think it did the same for the disciples. They had already given up everything to follow Jesus, and here they heard of giving up things that they could never imagine – a priceless pearl, most of them would never see or touch a real pearl, or run across a treasure, let alone have anything of value to sell in order to buy a field. Many of us have pearls, and treasure, making it all the harder to think about giving them up.

Let's start with the Treasure in the field.

As we discussed the treasure in the field in Bible study Wednesday, we really struggled. The one who discovered the treasure in the field and hid it, then sold everything to buy it, was seen as a thief for not letting the owner know about the treasure. We could not seem to get past that. But treasure is not always recognized by the one who owns it, and is it the buyers responsibility to make them aware of it?

It was hard to find an example where this was not the case, and then I remembered a story my niece recently told me. She was visiting friends in Jamaica who had just purchased a beautiful home on the ocean. As she looked out over the property she saw several, rather unattractive life size statues that ringed the property. They blocked the view and she asked them if they were going to get rid of them or at least move them. The owner said with a laugh, "Just as soon as the museum can pick them up."

She looked at him strangely and said what? He told her these unattractive sculptures were actually ancient Greek statues that had been moved to the island in the 1930's. The property had passed through several owners over the years and the current sellers of the property did not know that they were valuable, nor had the owners before them, in fact they were afraid the statues might make it difficult to sell the property.

My niece's friend purchasing the property was not sure of their worth, but as they negotiated and closed the deal he began to do some research and discovered their origins. Each of the 10 statues was worth as much as they had paid for the entire property. Their bid on the property was accepted and the

sale complete before the true nature of the pedigree of the statues became known. Should they have gone back to the sellers and told them they had underpriced the property? Is there some responsibility of the owner to discern the value of what they own?

I wondered about the criteria that might lead to forfeiting what one owns. These stories in Matthew are told to people who accept Jesus as the Messiah and those who don't. The people Jesus first came to were the Jews. They were his people and he was to be their Messiah. But the leaders did not accept him. Might the field in this parable be the Jewish community that, in rejecting Jesus, has forfeited their right to the field and the treasure in it? The worker who uncovers the treasure that is Jesus, and gives up all to follow is the one who believes, is that the theft?

In Matt 21:43 Jesus speaks in the temple and answers the questions of the chief priests and elders with questions of his own, of course told in parables. When they become frustrated and fail to give acceptable answers, he says, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." Might Jesus be speaking to the one who recognizes the treasure that others see as junk?

Jenny Maness, who started the Turnaround Resource Center in Lebanon Junction, Kentucky, found her treasure in a field most would have walked right by. She gave all she had to start an organization that brings the love for neighbor that Jesus commands to a community in desperate need.

Now on to the Merchant and the pearl of great value.

Those first century people and we 21st century people see the merchant through similar as well as very different lenses. With our twentieth-first century eyes, we see this as primarily consumerism, buying and selling.

For us the merchant is someone we can identify with, maybe it is even your identity. Commerce is a respected profession today.

But, in the time of these parables the merchant and the marketplace were distrusted and suspect – remember Jesus in the Temple throwing out the money changers – remember him saying "Stop making my father's house a marketplace!" So why does Jesus use a merchant as the one who recognizes the worth of the pearl?

In some ways things haven't changed – Joseph was sold, the Israelites were sold as slaves, and today there are coyotes who sell passage to those fleeing violence and poverty, there are sex traffickers preying on the vulnerable, and those who sell get rich quick scams to susceptible people.

Searching for pearls and selling them is the merchant's goal, not necessarily searching for this specific pearl. In the past he had searched and found many wonderful pearls, but was left wanting, thirsty for more. In finding this pearl, in the selling of everything, his identity is changed. This treasured pearl is not something he will sell, and now he has nothing to trade. He is no longer a merchant. He has risked all for this one treasured pearl.

Amy Jill Levine, in her book *Short Stories by Jesus* that we are using for our parable studies after worship, tells the story of a young woman who gives up all to pursue her PhD in New Testament studies. She leaves a marriage in which she is not valued, moves away and gives up everything for this goal - this is her pearl. She claims that through this giving up she has redefined herself. Maybe when we risk all for the treasure, God is the one doing the redefining.

I wonder where in these stories you see yourself. Are you the one who searches or the one who expectantly finds?

This joy that fills the finder of the treasure - have you ever experienced such joy? Joy that changed your priorities, that caused you to be less attached to things that were previously important to you?

Jesus always grabs us. He flips everything over, like the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. He won't allow us to be comfortable, he knows we will not move out unless we are unsettled. Jesus sends us out to seek the Kingdom of Heaven, whether we know it or not.

The kingdom of heaven is here breaking through in our everyday lives if we are willing to risk seeking and finding it. Where do you see and join into this kingdom life?

The kingdom of heaven is walking onto a job site on work trip and seeing a young person sitting on the porch painting an old woman's fingernails. Holding the hand of someone who has been alone for years.

The kingdom of heaven is sitting behind a young father in church who is patiently explaining the words of liturgy to his young son. Sharing the treasure with the next generation.

The kingdom of heaven is a friend who will sit with you in your pain, and not try to fix it, just listen. One who is not afraid to be unable to help.

But, the kingdom of God is also not yet here.

I see the here and not yet in the Pride Parade in Chicago today - a million people celebrating how far LBGTQ+ rights have come, and how far they still need to go. How far we need to go before all God's beloved around the world are free to live as God has called us. Loving our neighbors as ourselves without qualifiers.

Jesus painted confusing images like these found in parables to reveal the risk factor of God's Kingdom. God's Kingdom demands everything from the believer. Loyalty to family or neighbors, the desire for financial security, the drive for political power, all come second. The believer must put God first in all things, even if he or she looks like the fool who gives everything up for the treasure.

Another helpful insight I discovered compared The Pearl of Great Price and Treasure Hidden in the Field with Harry Potter. Harry is invited to join Hogwarts – the Ivy League of Wizarding Schools. This is of such great value to Harry that he lets go and leaves everything behind. Even though he does not have much to leave behind, it is all that he has. And, he is told to walk straight into a brick column at the railroad station to catch the train to Hogwarts.

Sounds pretty foolish, I can just imagine how Harry's aunt, uncle and cousin would ridicule him for this. This is all about risk and trust. In these parables, Jesus challenges us to trust, to let go of all that we are holding on to and be as ready to step into something new for God as Harry was to step into that column and go to Hogwarts.

The letting go allows us to open up. A clenched fist, holding on, is very different from an open hand, ready to give or receive. This congregation has become an open hand, relaxing the grip and becoming open to God's action around you. An example of that is the letting go of the anxiety of waiting for whom God might be calling to be your next pastor, to focusing on moving forward, trusting that God has it. And it seems like then it just happened.

In our busy distracted lives we tend to wait, wait to see what will happen, wait to see who will step out first, to see if it is safe, instead of seeking or being open to being found. This poem by Andrew King on reflecting on these two parables reminds us that all the things we think are so important are not.

NO TIME LEFT FOR WAITING – Andrew King (Matthew 13: 44-52)

No time for spreadsheets,
for the accountant's calculations.
No time for checking the agenda,
the meetings scheduled.
No time for the radio station's
business headlines,
for Googling the financial news.
Let the other hunters continue
to dig on their various islands –
places you have tried before,
long through the soulless days,
the heartless nights –
today you have discovered
the riches you've been waiting for,
searching for,
you and the world waiting and searching,
your whole life.
No time for the rear-view mirror.

No time for the GPS to suggest
alternate routes that might
contain less risk or cost.
This is highest value; this is greatest
treasure;
the pearl the world in its wisdom
has been diving for, coming up empty
handed.
This is worth staking your day,
your path,
your life upon.
This is life itself.
It is the kingdom of heaven.
It is Christ, and the way
he teaches and gives.
It is the love of God for you
and for the aching, breaking,
yearning world.
No time left for waiting.
Come and buy the entire field.

What would each of us give up for the treasure? In the end, does what we give up even come close to what we gain? I challenge us to stop waiting and buy the field or the pearl.

For as Jesus tells us in **Matthew 6:21** - "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." AMEN