

Investments & Acquisitions

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-46

July 26, 2020

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, IL

When I was a boy growing up in Swathmore, Pennsylvania--I had a favorite routine: after Elementary School got out I walked downtown to Rexall Drug, went inside to the extensive Comic Book section (Thor was my favorite!) bought a comic for 15 or even 25 cents, a Sugar Daddy for 10 cents, ran across the college lacrosse field to the playground behind the Presbyterian Church and greedily read that comic from cover to cover while chewing on my caramel stick.

If you do the math, this routine, if practiced five days a week, would cost me between \$1.25 and \$1.75 weekly—and at that time, my allowance was only 75 cents weekly. This created motivation for employment—and back then, the surpassing desire of my pre-adolescent life was to possess the 500 Revolutionary War soldiers (including Musketmen, Officers, Cannon and Cavalry in British Red and Continental Blue) which were advertised prominently in every comic book I bought. Their price was \$5.95, plus shipping. I knew I had to possess these soldiers or die trying...

So I forwent my weekly ration of comic books and candy and took on small jobs around the house. Three weeks passed, then four, and I finally had enough money. I sent it in, plus the shipping, and settled down to wait on the 4-6 week delivery date with brilliant plans for making war in the church sandbox.

They say that anticipation brings its own joy, which was a good thing for me. I was anticipating a large package full of exquisitely-crafted soldiers in colorful uniforms. What eventually arrived was a small box containing 500 pieces of blue and red plastic suggesting barely-recognizable two-dimensional representations of soldiers. I was a very disappointed little guy! But I had learned a great life lesson: about the stuff we want and the things we get...and the joy we all need.

I

Which brings us to these four short parables of Jesus, his teaching on the Kingdom of Heaven, four stories of investment and acquisition: of priorities, joy and grace.

The first is the Parable of the Mustard Seed: the smallest of seeds, 750 of which weigh less than a gram. A man took that seed and planted it right in his own backyard, and the seed grew into a tree large enough for the birds of the air to find shelter.

I don't know much about mustard seeds, but my son Evan planted some pepper and tomato seeds in his backyard last May, and now he's got something very close to a jungle out there—incredible abundance! That's the point being made here: the kingdom of heaven can be seen in

the tiniest acts of goodness, like tutoring a kid from North Lawndale who goes on to graduate from college, or investing \$20,000 in an inner-city business plan that ends up employing not one person, but ten more from that same community.

These are examples from gardening or education or capital investment, but when we speak of the kingdom of heaven, the dynamic is one of faith: of small beginnings leading to glorious ends.

Consider the Parable of the Yeast. We're told the kingdom of heaven is like a woman now...a woman who takes a fistful of yeast and adds it to 3 full measures of flour—that's about 36 quarts! That's going to make a whole lot of bread—enough to feed everyone on our Work trip with a week's worth of sandwiches. And all that from just a handful of yeast! Flour and water produces unsavory dough...but a little yeast worked into that dough will turn it in the oven into loaves of delicious homemade bread—enough to feed a hungry multitude. Sound familiar? The yeasty kingdom of heaven, worked into the dough of this world, will bring forth goodness to feed both body and soul. Consider the good work this church is undertaking to feed underprivileged children and their families in neighboring communities like Highwood and Waukegan. Investments of generosity like these are being repeated thousands of times across our nation today as caring people battle the effects of unemployment and the ongoing pandemic. When it comes to the work of the kingdom, Jesus is telling us that a very little goes a long, long way. The power belongs to God and not to us. The power is inherent in the seed and in the yeast. It will accomplish its own result!

Out part is to choose to work it into the dough of our daily living, into the soil of our lives.

II

The last two parables concern acquisitions—acquisitions driven by the discovery of something of supreme value: the treasure hidden in a field which the farmer found; and the pearl of great price which the merchant found. Both people—one rich and the other not—are filled with joy: joy deep enough to cause them to sell all that they have in order to acquire and possess these treasures. There is no hardship or sacrifice mentioned here. The farmer and merchant are joyfully acting on their newfound priorities.

When the Gospels speak of the kingdom of God, or in Matthew's Gospel, the kingdom of heaven, joy accompanies every instance of its revelation. From the shepherds and Wise Men to the lilies of the field, the advent of the kingdom is responded to with joy. The blind see and the lame walk; the hungry are fed and the imprisoned set free. The leper is made clean and the sinner is forgiven. What is our response? Will we joyfully go forth forgiving others, as Jesus taught us to pray and do?

What then is this kingdom, that it should grow us, and change us, and fill us with such unspeakable joy? The joys of investing in and acquiring what is good? Here are four observations:

1. The kingdom of heaven is a spiritual realm over which God alone reigns as Sovereign.
2. The kingdom of heaven refers not so much to a place, or even a people, as it does to the activity of the King himself. You can glimpse it in a Lake Michigan sunrise and find evidence of it even in church—but it is far bigger and wilder!
3. The kingdom of heaven is made visible when God's will is being done on earth.
4. And finally, the kingdom of heaven is experienced through GRACE: in the coming of the King himself, bearing divine gifts to be received but not achieved, inherited but not entitled. Some open that present sooner than others. Some never open it at all, preferring to tear the wrappings off other things, like my box of toy soldiers, and all the other toys which followed, all of which failed to deliver their promise of joy.

True joy and God's Kingdom share this truth in common: they both surprise us with gifts of grace, gifts which can reprioritize our living. Consider these three questions:

- 1) What do you think about?
- 2) How do you use your money?
- 3) How do you spend your time?

Answering these three questions truthfully will reveal your life's priorities. How is your relationship to Jesus Christ impacting these priorities? Are you joyfully willing to reorder stuff of lesser value in order to "will one thing," as Soren Kierkegaard put it, "to will that which is good, with purity of heart?"

These parables of Jesus are not just about grace: they call us to act on God's grace with joy, trust and perseverance.

III

When my mother-in-law Haroldine Chandler turned eighty, the family wanted to give her something of significance and beauty: a gift that reflected what she had come to mean to all of us. Haroldine married Deb's father John at the end of WWII. After John became a Presbyterian Minister, they worked together starting churches from San Diego to Stockton. Haroldine possessed a simple faith characterized by a deep and childlike trust in God. She wasn't the loudest voice in the family. She let others lead the cavalry charge! But she usually was the wisest voice. Her quiet devotion to God and to each one of us both in good times and hard times was like a rock. So we commissioned this sculpture for her—something that reflected her purity of heart: a lamb and a rock; a little child, and the Pearl.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of priceless worth, he joyfully went and sold everything he had and bought it."

What are you looking for? Who will you look to to find it?

-Rev. Clinton G. Roberts