

The Treasure and the Pearl

Matthew 13:44-46

Turn to Matthew 13 please. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus preached like this: *“The time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has arrived. Repent and believe this good news.”*

If the time had been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God had arrived, as Jesus said, then the Roman armies should have been chased out of Jerusalem by the end of the week, and chased out of Rome itself by the end of the month. Then God would judge the nations, and rule the world.

Did that happen? No. What actually happened after Jesus preached those words? Jesus walked by the sea on an ordinary work day, and called two brothers from their fishing to follow him. They left their boats and followed him. He walked a bit farther and called two more.

Well, that’s nice, good for them. But is that the kingdom of God? Is that all that happens when the time is fulfilled? People were healed, also a fine thing, but the kingdom of God? No wonder people doubted Jesus. Even those who believed that Jesus was God’s chosen one did not know how to put together what Jesus was doing with the OT prophecies about God’s kingdom.

From prison, John the Baptist sent messengers to ask Jesus, “Are you the one? Or are we waiting for someone else?” John himself doubted, and who could blame him.

Jesus told the kingdom parables, stories about the kingdom of God, to help people in his day, both believers and sceptics, to sort out what kind of kingdom he was bringing.

Let’s read our text, two short parables, Matthew 13:44-46.

⁴⁴ *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then from joy over it went and sold all he had and bought that field. [NIV: in his joy]*

⁴⁵ *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.*

This is the last Sunday we’ll spend on these kingdom parables so I want to review a bit. Remember that Jesus is explaining to them and also to us why the kingdom looks like it does, and how the kingdom works. These stories help us understand our faith, and our world.

The parable of the sower and the seed and the different soils explains why so often the message about Jesus produces no harvest at all, and why in other people there is a great harvest, all from the same sower and the same seed = same message. (Matthew 13:3f)

The wheat and the weeds parable explains why evil continues on earth even while the kingdom is present and growing. (Matthew 13:24f)

The crop that grows without the farmer's understanding shows that the growth of the kingdom is God's doing. As by God's work, sun and rain and soil and whatever is in the seed produces a harvest, so also kingdom service produces growth and harvest in a way we do not understand. It is a similar work of God, quiet and patient and remarkable. (Mark 4:26f)

As the mustard seed starts small and yet by the end is large enough to produce shade and shelter, so the kingdom of God begins small and by the end will tower over everything else. (Mark 4:30f)

These are all Jesus explaining how his calling ordinary people to follow him really could mean that the time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom has arrived, so turn to God's ways and put your trust in Jesus.

The parables for today, the treasure in the field and the incredible pearl are Jesus continuing this same line of explaining: what the kingdom of God is like, and why it looks like it does.

Matt 13:44 - The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then from joy over it, went and sold all he had, and bought that field.

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. When Jesus says the kingdom is "like" something, he means the whole story, not just the treasure, but also the man, and the field, and the selling, and the buying – the kingdom is like the whole story.

The next story begins: the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant. But it does not stop there, the kingdom is not just the merchant, but the entire story about the pearl.

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field; when a man found it ...

The kingdom of God can be hidden, that is a part of this story. It can be hidden, and it can be found. That already is so different from the expectations around him. You and I need to know this: the kingdom of God can be hidden, and it can be found.

So a man is walking in a field, it is not his field, he's just there. And something curious is poking out of the dirt, and he looks more closely, digs around, and sees that it is a very great treasure. So he carefully covers it up, and in sheer glee goes and sells everything he owns to get enough to buy that field.

Some are concerned about the legality of this, of buying the field to get the treasure. Does buying the field really make the treasure his? In this story, yes. The story assumes that if the man had dug up the treasure at night and put it in a sack and carried it home, that would be stealing.

By buying the field fairly, he has legitimate right to the treasure. The previous owner knows nothing of the treasure, it is not his. As Jesus tells the story, by purchasing the field, the man has fair right to the treasure. Jesus assumes his audience will think the same; let's leave it at that.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then from joy over it went and sold all he had and bought that field.

“From joy over it he went and sold all he had.” I got that line from the NASB. “From joy” is how it reads in Greek, and we should stick with that. It is not quite enough to say “in his joy he sold all” or “with joy he sold all” or “joyfully he sold all,” which is what most translations do.

These are all true, but as it’s worded, it is more. Joy is the motivator, the energizer, the passion that insists he sell all to buy that field. “From joy over it he went and sold all.” His joy drove him and steered him, his joy pushed him to take this action. Isn’t that great?

Jesus is telling us this to give us perspective. If we would recognize the value of what we found, we’d respond this way. It makes selling all a small thing compared to getting this treasure!

Paul writes in Philippians 3, *I have lost all things, and consider them garbage, because of the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.* Losing all is a small thing compared to the treasure we gain.

Matthew 13:45-46 - *Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls.*
⁴⁶ *When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.*

This man is a pearl merchant. He buys pearls from a market where oyster fishermen and pearl harvesters bring them, and then our merchant sells them to jewelers or perhaps directly to wealthy people. He makes his living from finding and buying pearls at the source, and selling them at profit to those who want good pearls.

While making his rounds, he sees a pearl that is remarkable, it is incredible. They are asking a lot for this amazing pearl, other merchants walk past it, but our merchant knows they are not asking nearly enough. He knows this pearl is far more valuable than they think it is. If he can get this incredible pearl, he’s got it made. So, he sells all he has and buys the pearl.

Jesus does not mention “joy” in the pearl story. Our pearl merchant seems more calculating than the man in the field. The merchant evaluates profit and loss, advantages and disadvantages. He cannot afford to let passion steer him, he makes a living only if he does this carefully.

BUT: his shrewd way of living led him to act in exactly the same way as the man who found the treasure. He went away and sold all he had and bought the pearl. He is not moved by joy, in this story, he is moved by the raw value he could see in this one great pearl. So he sold all to buy it.

For passionate people moved by joy, and for calculating people moved by raw value, for both, the kingdom of God is the deal of a lifetime. One gets there as fast as the other, and they both respond the same way.

There are some Christian circles in which passionate people are viewed as more godly than careful evaluating people. There are other Christian circles where passionate people are mistrusted, careful thoughtful people are better.

Jesus makes clear from this pair of stories that he has no use for either prejudice. He does not think passionate people are better, or more likely to find the kingdom, and he does not think careful evaluating people are better and more likely to find the kingdom. Both kinds of people find and recognize the kingdom for what it is, and both respond with all their might.

(And don't make the pearl merchant someone without feeling. No one sells everything to buy a pearl without adrenaline flowing.)

There is one other difference between these two finders. The man in the field is not a seeker, not looking for anything. He's just walking along, taking a shortcut to somewhere, sees something he can hardly believe, recognizes that *whatever* it takes to get this, it is a bargain.

The second man is a seeker, been looking years for something like this, more or less knows what he's looking for, there in a box with some other pearls, only as he looks he can see that this pearl is most certainly *not* like the others.

Both kinds of people find the kingdom, the wanderers and the seekers. These two parables are not about how to find the kingdom. They are about recognizing value when it is seen.

The treasure, my brothers and sisters, is something we here already have. It is what happens when we trust and Jesus and make him our Lord. We are reconciled to God, our sins are forgiven, we receive the Holy Spirit, we are joined to each other as members of Christ's own body, and we receive an inheritance. That's the treasure and the pearl.

In simplest terms, though the treasure is Jesus himself, the pearl is Jesus. *I have lost all things, and consider them garbage, because of the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*

So what is the emphasis of these stories? Is it on the cost of discipleship, on selling all? Is the emphasis on joy? Or on the great value of the kingdom? We don't have to choose. It is certainly all of these.

These two parables are about recognizing value. Though the field wanderer and the pearl seeker get to the kingdom by different ways, they respond in just the same way: they trade in everything to be a part of the kingdom. And when they trade in everything, they both do so confidently.

They both see, and recognize, and take drastic action. Joy moves one to take drastic action, raw value moves the other, but both see, and recognize great value, and trade in everything for this.

They both know that by trading in everything for the kingdom, they are taking huge step *forward*. Both know that what they are getting is far more valuable than what they are losing. Neither feels like they are losing, both know they are gaining immensely.

This story is for those outside the kingdom, and also for those inside. Jesus told these kingdom parables many times, and told them to both kinds of people. Those outside the kingdom need to know that the kingdom of God is hidden, but also available to be found and recognized.

The kingdom sits in the open like the pearl in a box, with others apparently similar, where it is not recognized, but it could be recognized. So look carefully.

Those of us inside the kingdom need this story as a refresher course on the big picture, and where real value lies. Even those inside have lopsided notions of value, we get twisted ideas.

The kingdom of God is not an add-on, not an accessory. Jesus the Lord is not something we add to our lives, like a nice laptop or a vehicle. That just means we have not recognized the treasure.

Recognizing Jesus means understanding that he is the most valuable thing we could have or ever hope to have, and if we have Jesus, we have it made!!

Jesus sent out the 72 followers to preach and heal. ¹⁷ *The seventy-two returned with joy and said, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.”* ¹⁸ *He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven... (omit v19)* ²⁰ *However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”* Luke 10

Jesus tells us: Don't rejoice in your spiritual ability, rejoice that you found the treasure and recognized it! Don't rejoice in your spiritual success, rejoice that you saw the costly pearl and knew it was worth more than anything else. Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

Above all, for those inside the kingdom, these stories encourage us. These stories remind us that when we put our trust in Christ and put our lives in his hands, we struck it rich. The most fortunate thing that could happen to any human on this planet happened to us.

We have found the greatest treasure that ever existed on earth and through eternity, and made it ours. We came across the most valuable jewel that ever existed on earth and through eternity, it is ours to keep.

These two people both traded in everything to get their treasure. To get Jesus and keep him, the rest of life must change. And he does change our lives, as part of the gift. The treasure and the pearl are gifts of God, God loved the world so much he gave us his Son, he gave his Son for us.

The best thing we could do for ourselves is recognize that Jesus is the gift of eternity, and to treat Jesus as the most valuable thing we have. Amen.