

“Summer of Parables: Hidden Treasure and Pearl of Great Price”

Matt. 13:44-46

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On September 4, 1622 an armada of 28 ships left the Port of Havana sailing on a return voyage to Spain. Among the ships were the Santa Margarita, and the Atocha. Just one day after departing the ships were overtaken by a hurricane. Twenty of the ships went down along with 550 crew members. The Santa Margarita and the Atocha were laden with an incalculable amount of gold, silver, emeralds and treasures—all stolen from the Peruvian Indigenous people. The ships went down about 56 km west of Key West Florida and were lost.

In the 1960s a California treasure hunter named Mel Fisher became fascinated by the lore of the stories of the Atocha and the Santa Margarita which had never been found. Fisher made it his life's passion to uncover these treasures on the ocean floor. That passion changed everything in his life. In his enthusiasm he moved his whole family across the continent to Key West, Florida and began what many felt was a waste of time, energy and resources. So compelled was Fisher that he borrowed, wrangled and bribed anyone he could to secure help to finance his lost treasure search. He searched and searched and searched—for 16 years without success. To keep up the spirits of those who worked with him he would say, “Today is the day!” But on July 20, 1985 they found the treasure. The debris field stretched for 16 km. Fisher and his team gradually found: 200 pounds of gold bars; 300 emeralds; 114,000 silver coins and over 30 tonnes of silver bar. You can visit the Mel Fisher Museum in Key West where you can see some of that incredible find. Finding that treasure was Mel Fisher's passion.

Today we continue our Summer of Parables at Oakridge Church. And Mel Fisher's story is a great back drop for today's short treasure parables that are only three verses long. In the first Jesus says that kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found, reburied and then in his joy he goes, sells all that he has, and buys that field. In the second parable Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; and on finding one pearl of great value, he sells all that he has and buys it.

So what do the two stories have in common?—something of great value has been uncovered or found; in the first a hidden treasure; in the second an exquisite pearl of great worth. The second common feature is that when the items are found—all is sold to purchase it. The third common thread is that both make a successful purchase—the first

purchased the piece of treasure containing the hidden treasure; the second purchased the valuable pearl.

But there are differences in these two parables, as well. The first guy comes upon the treasure by accident, finds it, reburies it then sells all that he has and buys that field. The second story involves a pearl merchant—a professional; a person who made his livelihood by buying and selling these pearls. In Jesus' day pearls held the topmost rank among all things of price—even above rubies. They were so priceless that the majority of the population would never have seen a real pearl.

Some of you will find it hard to get past what seems a bit devious of the first man who finds the treasure in the field that does not belong to him; then covers up this treasure again so the owner won't know it's there and, without saying a word, he buys this field from the unsuspecting owner. It sounds a little sneaky!

In Jesus' day there were no banks or safety deposit boxes in which to store your valuables. Bandits and robbers were a real problem—as we know from Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan. There were also marching armies that stole and plundered. So it was not uncommon in that day where people were threatened they would take their valuables, wrap them up and bury them in the ground. When the threat was past they would return and dig them up. But living under Roman occupation, Jews were sometimes taken captive or exiled. Sometimes their treasures might remain in the ground for generations—until they were eventually found by others.

Today's parables remind us that the Kingdom of God can get lost in our lives—buried in the minutia of so many things that presses in on our lives—like the silt and sediment that covered that Floridian treasure. We stop taking time for prayer and Scripture each day. Instead of attending worship every week we come every other week or once a month. When asked to give of our time, talents and resources we say we're too busy already, or too tired, or too overcommitted already. With so many distractions this dynamic reign of God breaking into human experience gets hobbled and buried in the mundane.

And we certainly live in the age of distraction. I remember our kids noticing it when we were out for pizza on Valentine's Day about 10 years ago. They remarked on a couple sitting near us—obviously out for Valentine's Day. But instead of gazing lovingly into each other's eyes the couple was glued to their phones for most of their meal together. Ten years later, however, such distracted dining has become common practice.

Continuous Partial Attention is a phrase coined by Linda Stone to describe the modern adaptive behaviour of continuously dividing one's attention—scrolling through

Facebook, checking email and Twitter, answering texts and Instagram—while watching TV and also carrying on a conversation with a spouse or a child. With all of the technology available to us we have a tendency to operate with a split focus as we try to scan and optimize our opportunities, activities and contacts—in an effort to not miss anything that is going on.

We are continually seeking. There is always a new necklace, a new career, a new form of study, a nagging sense that we have not done what we need to do. And each time we reach our goal, it turns out to be ephemeral. We flit from desire to desire, never permanently fulfilled, always somewhat discontent. Saint Augustine wrote, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”

Jesus cared about prioritizing. We cannot worship the God of the universe and give him our full attention while hobbled in minutia. A disciple’s life must be intentionally focused. Paul speaks about this focus in Philippians 2 when he writes: “Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant... I’ve dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him.” A disciple’s life must be intentionally focused. And this is the gift of today’s two parables. True disciples are those who recognize that God’s kingdom is so valuable that it’s worth giving up whatever it takes to be its citizens.

The Gospel of the Kingdom isn’t a nice religious idea that you might like to explore when you have a few minutes free. The Kingdom of God is like a fabulous treasure—yours for the taking if you give up everything else to buy that field where it’s hidden. It’s like the biggest finest, purest pearl that any jeweller ever imagined. And it’s yours for the taking if you will sell everything else—including all the other pearls that you’ve ever owned, in order to purchase it.

What we’re to notice in these two parables is the kingdom’s overwhelming attraction for those who recognize it—the Pearl and the Treasure—which results in selling all that they have in order to buy the pearl, abandoning everything else for the field in which the treasure is hid. Common sense obliterated by deep joy.

Don’t miss the joy here. “In his joy” this first guy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. He is carried away by joy—not deceit. Joy is discovering the reality of Jesus and the wisdom of his hidden teaching, because as Jesus says, “where your treasure is there is your heart.” (Matthew 6:21) What needs to go in your life in order to find such joy in Christ?