

“THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN”

Matthew 13:44-52

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

July 30, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 13, verses 44 through 52. It is on page 691 of the pew Bible. Here Jesus gives us three short, but loaded, parables. Then we'll spend our time together meditating on them. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Matthew 13, we begin reading at verse 44.

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. 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 who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁴⁷ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. ⁴⁸ When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹ “Have you understood all these things?” They said to him, “Yes.” ⁵² And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Matthew 13 is a chapter of parables—seven of them to be exact. And according to Jesus' own words, the subject matter of all of them is “The Kingdom of Heaven.” Last week we heard the parable of the weeds. The week before that we read the parable of the sower. And there's also the parables of the mustard seed and of the leaven, both of which we skipped over. All four of these parables were spoken to the crowds.

When asked by his disciples why he spoke to the crowds in parables, Jesus said, “**To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given**” (13:11). To those who disbelieved, Jesus was a closed book. They had his signs and wonders. They even had much of his clear and open teachings. But since they did not believe, he was not about to reveal the secrets of his kingdom to them. When his disciples asked him privately what these parables meant, he told them. It was to them that he desired to reveal the secrets of the kingdom.

That's what happened with the parable of the weeds. When Jesus left the crowds and was alone with his disciples, they asked him what it meant, and he told them. But then Jesus continued to speak to them in parables. Right after he explained the parable of the weeds, he quickly fires off three more parables, even though it's just him and his disciples. So even though

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Jesus is not trying to hide anything from them, apparently there is still value in teaching through parables. The parables force us to chew on Jesus’ words for a bit. They make us stop and think. So that’s what we’re going to do today as we consider these three parables.

Jesus tells them the parable of the hidden treasure, the parable of the pearl of great value, and the parable of the net. And then, since he wants them to understand, he asks, “**Have you understood all these things?**” (13:51), and they say, “Yes” (13:52).

Now, I’m not sure if they said, “yes,” because they actually understood, or because they *thought* they were supposed to understand and were afraid to say, “No.” I wonder, if Jesus had followed up by saying, “Okay, what do they mean?” could they have given him an answer?

The reason I say that is because the interpretation of these parables—or at least the first two—has become a matter of debate. And I’m not sure I can settle the debate. Now, it might sound kind of strange to hear me say that, because I can act like kind of a know-it-all sometimes, and you do want your pastor to be able to give you some definitive answers. But I’m not going to stand here and say I can settle the issue, when I’m not sure I can.

There are two basic interpretations of the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl, and I’ll give you both of them. Then you can think about them for a while and maybe even discuss them at lunch. After all, part of the purpose of parables is to cause us to meditate on God’s Word.

And unless Jesus tells us what the parables mean, we’re not going to create any new doctrines based on them. Teaching new doctrines isn’t the purpose of the parables. The purpose is to make us think about the doctrines taught in the more straightforward parts of Scripture.

So the parables ...

We’ll consider the last one first, because it’s the easiest. The parable of the net that pulls up all kinds of different fish is about the judgment at the end of the age. We know this because Jesus tells us so (13:49). The point is similar to that of the parable of the weeds. At the end of the age, the angels will separate the evil from the righteous, and they will “**throw [the evil] into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**” (13:50) So we learn from this that there really is a judgment at the end of the age, there really is a hell, and people really do go there. We know this because Jesus tells us so.

This, of course, is not a popular teaching. But when the world objects to the doctrine of hell on the basis that they can’t believe a loving God would actually send people there, we remind them that the whole point of Christianity is what our loving God did to rescue us from hell.

And we see a glimpse of that in the first two parables.

There are two perfectly fine ways we can understand the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value.

The debate revolves around who the man in these parables represents. Does he represent any seeking person who happens to find the Kingdom of Heaven? Or does he represent Jesus, who “**came to seek and to save the lost**” (Luke 19:10)?

The traditional interpretation is that the man who finds the treasure and the merchant who finds the pearl, both represent any person who finds the Kingdom of Heaven. Both the treasure

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and the pearl, then, represent the Kingdom of Heaven or, we could say, Jesus himself, because he is the King of the Kingdom. If you find the King, you have found the Kingdom. And you might have noticed, this interpretation is the basis for the hymn “Jesus, Priceless Treasure” (*Ambassador Hymnal*, #186).

The point, then, is that the Kingdom of Heaven is of such great and lasting value that it is worth giving up anything and everything to gain it.

And this is true. When we think about all of our earthly possessions or whatever we might treasure in this life, it all pales in comparison to the glory of heaven. And when we compare the length of this life to eternity, calling this life a mere breath—that’s an overestimation of this life.

The Kingdom of heaven is of such great and lasting value that it is worth giving up anything and everything to gain it.

How often we need to be reminded of this, because all we experience in this life is the here and now. We don’t see the glory to be revealed. So we forget about it as we get wrapped up in the passing affairs of this world. But if we actually discovered and experienced the value of the Kingdom of Heaven, we would joyfully give up anything and everything to get it.

So this is the traditional interpretation. And throughout much of Church history, this understanding has been almost unanimously accepted. The mere fact that the Church Fathers and reformers all interpreted these two parables this way carries a lot of weight.

However, there are a few problems with this interpretation. The first problem is that Scripture clearly teaches us that “no one seeks for God” (*Rom. 3:11*). Yes, God commands us and invites us to seek him. But no one actually seeks for God who hasn’t already been made a disciple.

And God doesn’t hide the Kingdom from us as if he doesn’t want us to find it. God *does* want us to find it, and that’s why *he* comes searching for *us*.

Another problem is that both characters in the parables actually *buy* the treasures they find. But the Kingdom of Heaven isn’t for sale. And, even if it were, you and I can’t afford it. Whether we try to buy it with money or good works or positive vibes or whatever, we just don’t have enough of anything to get it. The Kingdom of Heaven is always a gift to us.

Then the man who found the treasure in the field actually hid it so no one else could find it. Then he pulled a fast one on the owner. Besides sounding a bit immoral, God doesn’t want us to hide the Kingdom of Heaven, but to proclaim it to the entire world.

So if we go with the traditional interpretation, we don’t take everything in the parable to be teaching us something. We just stick to the main point. And this is common with parables. Often times they make only one main point. And we don’t need everything in the parable to be a perfect metaphor. Every metaphor breaks down at some point. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be a metaphor anymore, but the thing itself.

So we don’t push the parable beyond where it’s intended to go. If we go with the traditional interpretation, we keep the point simple. The Kingdom of heaven is of such great and lasting value that it is worth giving up anything and everything to gain it. And this is true. So we don’t go wrong with the traditional interpretation.

Then there is what we could call the “Christological” interpretation. *Christological* is a big word. But, as you might be able to guess, it simply means the parable is about Jesus. In this

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interpretation, the man who finds the treasure and the merchant who finds the pearl both represent Jesus. The treasure and the pearl, then, would be the Church.

This interpretation has its limits as well, but there are more elements of it that correspond to reality in a theologically sound manner. But the biggest thing this interpretation has going for it is that it makes the parable to be about Jesus. And this is a big deal. Most parables are about Jesus.

If you skim through *The Gospel of Matthew*—and this can be your homework for the week. Skim through Matthew and just note who the heroes of the parables are. Unless I’m missing something, you’re going to find that the hero or the person in charge is always God. And, often times, it is more specifically Jesus. So it would be a bit strange then to have these two parables about the Kingdom of Heaven in which the King isn’t really involved.

But the one thing that might give us pause with this interpretation is the overwhelming value of the treasure and the pearl, which would represent the Church. If it’s an overestimation of humanity to imply that lost human beings search for God, wouldn’t it be an even bigger overestimation to think that sinful and rebellious human beings are an immensely valuable treasure?

We might think so, but the answer is *no*. It’s not an overestimation at all. Value is all in the eye of the beholder. If you go to the grocery store and buy a pound of beef for \$3.19, how much is that pound of beef worth? It’s worth \$3.19, because that’s what you paid for it. Now, to someone who likes bratwurst better than hamburgers, maybe they don’t buy the pound of beef, because it’s not worth \$3.19 to them.

So when we ask, “What is a human being worth to God?” we answer the question by asking another question: “What did God pay?” And the answer is, “Everything.” Jesus Christ purchased us, “Not with silver and gold, but with His holy and precious blood and with His innocent sufferings and death” (*Small Catechism*).

And this is something God would have us understand about his love for us. What are you worth to him? You are worth the Son of God hanging dead on a Roman cross, because that’s what he paid for you. And what are your neighbors worth to God? They are worth the Son of God hanging dead on a Roman cross, because that’s what God paid for them. This is how we should value a human being.

Now we tend to value human beings based on what they can do for us. But that’s wrong. Sometimes we weep for our favorite celebrities who die from an accidental overdose. And that’s not wrong; we should weep for them. But then we might feel nothing for some random stranger we read about in the newspaper. But in both cases, this is a human being who is precious to God.

So what is a human being really worth? Whether it’s your child, or someone else’s child, or the old lady who cuts you off in traffic, or the cashier at Walmart, or the telemarketer who’s just calling to let you know, “There is no problem with your account,” all of these people are equally valuable to our Heavenly Father. The value of a human being is not determined by the benefit that person provides to you or to society. The value of a human being is determined by the price God was willing to pay.

So it’s really a valuation of God’s love. The question isn’t really, “How much is a human being worth?” It’s, “How much is a human being worth *to God*?”

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So when we read, “Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (13:44), we understand that to be a reference to the cross. Jesus Christ gave everything he had—up to and including his very own life—to purchase your soul and make you a member of his Church. And he did it joyfully.

So those are the two ways we can understand the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value. They could either mean that the Kingdom of heaven is of such great and lasting value that it is worth giving up anything and everything to gain it. And this is true.

Or they could mean that Jesus so valued the lost people of the world, that he went and sold everything he had—up to and including his own life—in order to redeem our souls from death and rescue us from the fiery furnace. This, of course, is also true.

And I wish I could tell you definitively which interpretation is right, but I can’t. So continue to meditate on Jesus’ words. That, after all, is what the parables are for. And rejoice in the great gift of salvation you have in Jesus. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.