

At Last!

Matthew 13: 44-46

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Forty-four years ago I stood in this pulpit for the very first time. I was a student at Fuller Seminary and my entire ministry lay ahead of me. Fred Cropp was the pastor at San Marino Community Church back then and, although I didn't have many conversations with him, I looked to the day when I, too, would be a preacher, a minister of the Word and sacrament like Dr. Cropp. Oh, did I forget to mention that I was the weekend janitor here?

I moved on to Princeton for my final years of study and once when Dr. Cropp was visiting Princeton he sought me out and introduced me to those around him as one who had been on the staff of San Marino Community Church...not mentioning that I was the weekend custodian. Now, forty-four years later thru the kindness of Rev. O'Grady and the Session, I am back at San Marino Community Church as Parish Associate.

The entire 13th chapter of Matthew's gospel is filled with Jesus' parables in what Dale Bruner, in his commentary, calls the field parables, of the sower and the weeds, the little power parables of mustard seed and leaven and the two gem parables of hidden treasures and the pearl, with a final story of a net full of fish. Dale says these combined parables summarize Matthew's whole gospel. They're stories told using familiar every day things and, although they are stories told two thousand years ago to people whose everyday lives do not match ours, we still find them meaningful because they serve as challenges to guide us in our faith journey, in our seeking to be disciples. ¹

I'd like to look at two of them with you: The parable of The Hidden Treasure and The Pearl of Great Value. These two gem parables are about the joy of finding the treasure of all treasures. The decisive lesson is not what the men have to give up but the reason for their doing so: the joy of the Gospel, the demand of the Gospel in the overwhelming experience in the splendor of discovery.

Jesus is talking about finding the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven. He made it clear that to follow him, to enter into this Kingdom of Heaven was the greatest treasure, but it was costly and time consuming. In other words it required discipline and persistence.

Here was a man plowing a field, preparing it as he had season after season for a future hoped for harvest. Let's imagine he has plowed the field many times before and on one hot, muggy Middle Eastern day his plow strikes something. Perhaps he became irritated because he has spent hours and

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Bruner, Dale, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Church Book*, Matthew 13-28, Wm. B. Erdman Publishing, 2004

hours removing rocks in this particular field.

If you've ever been to the Holy Land, you remember it is nothing but rocks. The man stops plowing and moving a bit of dirt around, he notices a shiny object. Removing more dirt he discovers a treasure chest, something that had apparently been buried many years before by someone who had forgotten the treasure. Looking inside the rusted box what he sees is unbelievable. He cannot believe the jewels, the gold and silver. He has found a treasure. Immediately he covers up his new-found treasure, marks the place, and leaves the field. In his joyful discovery he quickly gathers everything that he has of any value - all of it - and sells it to purchase the field. The central truth of the parable is clear: The Kingdom of Heaven, Christ's rule in your heart and mine, is worthy of everything we have.

The other parable for this morning concerns a pearl merchant. Let's imagine he's travelled the world, a veteran of many flea markets, bazaars, and garage sales, always on the lookout for the rare pearl of great beauty, of great value. One day, spotting a pearl of exquisite beauty it becomes the decisive moment of his travels, his life's journey, and his life's search. He sells everything he has to buy the pearl. Again, the central truth is clear. The Kingdom of Heaven, the rule of Christ in our hearts and lives is worth everything we have.

The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi and by the Holy Spirit to us, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ."² Both the farmer in the field and the pearl merchant came to the same decision, although they came by different routes. For the farmer, finding the treasure was one of those unexpected moments of blessing and joy. He did not expect it, but there it was. For the merchant, he had been searching for a lifetime, and then the moment came. Both of these stories challenge us to consider anew the gift of finding the King of Heaven the greatest treasure that will allow us a closer walk with God.

First, there is the joy of discovery. So many experiences of life are overlooked or soon forgotten and therefore never acted upon. Every time we gather as a congregation for worship; every day we faithfully go to work, or do our studies or care for others, we find ourselves standing on holy ground because God often comes to us where we are, as we are. Be alert; be prepared to be surprised by the joy of discovery because one never knows when, in the middle of your routine, the moment of joy and discovery will come.

2 Philippians 3:7-8

Both the farmer and the merchant were willing to sell everything they had; risking everything they had to claim the treasure. The requirement for success, the way to capture your dream, is to want it with all your strength, your mind, your heart, your soul. The farmer had plowed that same field many times and the routine of the ordinary turned his life into boredom and struggle, but he showed up every day to work the field. The merchant had looked at every pearl imaginable, attended every known estate sale, day in and day out, but then, one day, the moment came. There is something to be said about persistence. You know, it is a law of life. Everything that matters requires that we stay at it day after day after day.

Calvin Coolidge is not one of our most quoted presidents but he said this about persistence that makes sense: “Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.” The reality is that some of us don’t know the fullness of Christ because for whatever reason we’ve not been willing to pay the price of persistence: study, devotion, prayer, praise, seeking God first.

Ann Weems has written, “Those who wait for God watch with their hearts and not their eyes, listening, always listening for angel words.”³ That’s what these two parables are teaching. We must be open to the new opportunities that God wills for our lives. Do you remember the story of a mountain climber who found an eagle’s egg high on a hill? He carried it back to a chicken coop and placed it among some chicken eggs in the nest of a hen. So the eagle was hatched among a brood of chicks. As the eagle grew it did what the chickens did. It was convinced that it was a chicken. It clucked like a chicken, it flapped its wings like a chicken only to fly a few feet, and it scratched the ground for insects and seeds just like a chicken. One day it looked skyward and saw the most amazing creature it has ever seen. He was startled by the sheer majesty of form soaring gracefully above. “What is that?”, he asked. One of the chickens said, “That’s an eagle, the greatest of all birds.” The eagle, raised among the chickens, said, “Wow, I’d like to fly like that.”

“Forget it”, said the chicken. So the little eagle forgot and, though it was built for the sky, continued to scratch the ground searching for insects like a chicken and one day died still believing it was just a chicken. Can you relate to that story? We, who are in Christ, have been given access to the Kingdom of Heaven. We have been given the ability to soar on eagle’s wings and not grow weary.

3 Weems, Ann, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, Westminster John Knox Press, pg. 95

The prophet Isaiah wrote, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary, God’s understanding is unsearchable. God gives power to the faint and to him who has no might he increases strength. They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”⁴

There is a price to pay for being a disciple of Christ called persistence and discipline, devotion, prayer, praise, seeking first God’s way. Those who succeed in life are those who discipline themselves, who focus their energies on the central task of life everyday.

For the farmer it was necessity. The wellbeing of his family depended on him working that field every day with discipline and persistence. The merchant schooled himself looking for the perfect pearl and would not stop until he found it.

Here is a modern parable:

“I want this treasure. How much is it?”

Well, the merchant says, “It’s very expensive.”

“But how much?” We ask.

“Well, a very large amount”.

“Do you think I could ever own it?”

“Oh, of course, anyone can own it.”

“But didn’t you say it was very expensive?”

“Yes.”

“Well, how much is it?”

“Everything you have,” says the merchant.

We make up our minds, “All right, I’ll buy it,” we say.

“Well, what do you have?”, he wants to know.

“Let me write it down... Well, I have 100,000 thousand dollars in the bank. “

“Good, that’s a start. What else of value?”

“That’s all. That’s all the money I have.”

4 Isaiah 40:28-31

“Nothing more?”

“Well, I have some change here in my pocket.”

“How much?” We start digging,” Well, let’s see 30-40-60-80, a \$1.00 and 20 cents.”

“That’s fine. What else do you have?”

“Well, nothing... That’s all.”

“Where do you live?”

“In my house.”

“Let me add the house too then.” He writes it down. “You mean I have to live in my RV?”

“Oh, you have an RV? I’ll take it too. What else?”

“If you take my RV, I’ll have to sleep in my car.”

“You have a car?”

“Two of them.”

“Both become mine, both cars...What else?”

“Well, you already have my money, my house, my RV, my cars. What more do you want?”

“Are you alone in this world?”

“No, I have a wife and two children.”

“Oh good, I’ll take your wife and children, too. What else?”

“I have nothing left. I am left alone now.” Suddenly the merchant exclaims, “Oh, I almost forgot: You, yourself too, everything becomes mine. Wife, children, house, money, cars and you too.” Then he goes on, “Now listen, I will allow you to own all these things for the time being, but don’t forget they are mine, just as you are mine and whenever I need any of them you must give them up because now I am the owner.”

Yes, the prophet Isaiah is right on target, “No eyes have seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love the Lord.”⁵

At Last, Christ is the Lord of All.

5 Ibid.