

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Treasure Worth Having

Matthew 13:44-52

"Don't be above bending over to check a rusty can." That's what a California couple said last year after they discovered ten million dollars in gold coins buried in their backyard. The husband and wife, who were out walking their dog along a trail they had covered many times over many years, spotted an old can sticking out of the ground. Once they unearthed it, they discovered that it was full of uncirculated, mint condition coins from the mid to late 1800s. After discovering the gold, the couple got a metal detector, went back, and discovered seven more cans. The whole find, eventually totaling 1400 coins, came to be known as the Saddle Ridge Hoard. One member of the couple said, "I never would have thought we would have found something like this. However, in a weird way I feel like I have been preparing my whole life for it."¹ It was certainly a discovery that changed their lives.

I'm not sure if the man in today's Scripture passage from Matthew felt like he had been preparing his whole life for what he discovered, but I do know that he did what he thought was necessary to secure the treasure for himself. The man shows up in the first of a pair of parables that Jesus tells about the kingdom of heaven, comparing it to hidden treasure and to a merchant looking for pearls. These two parables are part of a larger section in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus uses these kinds of stories to stress the coming judgment and the urgency of coming into the life of God's reign.

According to Jesus, a field worker is just going about his ordinary, daily tasks, not looking for or anticipating anything special, when he stumbles upon some buried treasure. Naturally he's excited, and immediately moves into action to secure his find. He sticks the treasure back in the ground, goes home, puts his house and all its contents on the market, and uses the money to buy the field. That's how much this treasure is worth. It's worth the risk and the sacrifice, though we might wonder how much the risk involves some illegality too. After all, this man is trying to take possession of treasure he found on someone else's property. Couldn't Jesus have told a story where the central character is more law-abiding? Maybe so, but this wouldn't be the first time that Jesus has used someone whose actions are questionable to say something about the urgency of gaining the kingdom while the opportunity is there.

I don't want to belabor that issue. That would just take us down a side path instead of helping us concentrate on the heart of this story, and the parable that follows it. For you see, like the field worker, the merchant in the second parable also knows value when he sees it. In his case, he doesn't stumble upon something precious. He's actively seeking it and shopping for it. That's just how he makes his living. He's experienced in spotting precious pearls.

In that day and time, pearls had the status of gold or diamonds. But the pearl found by the merchant goes way beyond his expectations. He never anticipated finding one so valuable. So like the field worker, he goes and liquidates all his assets, so he'll have enough to buy

this exceptional pearl. Jesus says that this is what the kingdom of God is like. Not just like buried treasure or a fine pearl, though these are crucial to the story. But most of all, like a person who risks all in order to gain something of surpassing worth. Though one came across treasure by accident, while the other intentionally went looking for it, both of them, when confronted with the opportunity, did what they had to in order to possess what was available to them. This, says Jesus, is what God's kingdom is like.

What could possibly be more precious, more important, than the reality that God has come to us in Jesus, and that God is present and working in saving power? This reign of God, or as Matthew usually calls it, the "kingdom of heaven," has begun. And according to Jesus, God's action is often hidden and imperceptible to the world. But what God has started through Jesus, God will bring to completion, and the kingdom of heaven will be fully revealed.

But the fact that God's reign of justice and peace will come to full fruition in the future, in God's own time, doesn't mean that the present is any less urgent. In fact, just the opposite. The present is our God-given opportunity to say yes to the reign of God, to enter into the reign of God and its life. In other words, to become disciples of Jesus and come into God's reality. To come into a new sphere of life, a new space, God's space. Or we might also say, to come into God's world, the world as God has always intended it to be.

I like the way one commentator has put it when he says that in both of these parables, the person who finds something precious "sells everything for the sake of the one thing."² That's the way it is with the kingdom of God. For disciples of Jesus, the kingdom is our one thing, our main thing, our ultimate thing, our most precious thing. When I use the word "our," I don't mean that the kingdom is somehow earned by us, or belongs to us, or is brought into existence by our diligence and effort. The kingdom is always God's work, God's gift. It's a gift to be received by becoming a follower of Jesus and participating in God's rule with wholehearted faith, commitment, and obedience.

Doing that takes discernment. It takes being able to tell the difference between things that have lasting value and things that don't. It takes recognizing the one supreme treasure, the reign of God, and doing whatever it takes to obtain it. The problem is, there are so many other deceptive, distracting forms of treasure out there that can consume our attention and our action. Our lives get caught up in quests and treasure hunts that yield some very disappointing, and not so valuable, discoveries. In the process, we can miss out on the things of greatest worth, even when they're right in front of us.

Writer Robert Fulgham tells about a time when his daughter Molly was a little girl and gave him a paper bag to take to work with him. When asked what was in the bag, she answered, "Just some stuff. Take it with you." The next day, when he sat down at his desk for lunch, he pulled out the bag and poured out its contents: two ribbons, three stones, a plastic dinosaur, a pencil stub, a tiny seashell, used lipstick, two chocolate Kisses, and thirteen pennies. Fulgham chuckled, finished his lunch, and swept everything off into the wastebasket.

When he arrived home that evening, his daughter asked him where the bag was. He told her that he left it at the office. "Why?" he asked. "Well," she said, "those are my things in the sack, Daddy. The things I really like. I thought you might like to play with them, but now I want them back." When she saw her father hesitate, tears welled up in her eyes. "You didn't lose the bag, did you Daddy?" He told her that he hadn't, and that he would bring it home tomorrow.

After she went to bed, he went back to the office. He writes:

Molly had given me her treasures . . . all that a seven-year-old held dear. Love in a paper sack. And I missed it. I had thrown it away. Nothing in there I needed. It wasn't the first or last time I felt like my "Daddy Permit" was about to run out. I went back to my office, dumped all the wastebaskets out onto my desk. The janitor came in and asked, "Did you lose something?"

"Yeah. My mind! It's probably in there."

When Fulgham found the bag, he uncrumpled it and filled it again with his daughter's items. Then he took it home, sat down with Molly, and had her tell him the story of every treasure in the bag. He writes:

To my surprise, Molly gave me the bag several days later. Same ratty bag. Same stuff inside. I felt forgiven. Over several months, the bag went with me from time to time. It was never clear to me why I did or did not get it on a certain day. I began to think of it as the "Daddy Prize," and I tried to be good the night before so I could be given it the next morning.

In time Molly turned her attention to other things, lost interest in the game, grew up. Me . . . I was left holding the bag. She gave it to me one morning and never asked for it back. It sits in my office still, left over from when a child said, "Here. This is the best I've got. Take it. It's yours." I missed it the first time, but it's my bag now.³

What a treasure God has given us in Jesus Christ. The gift of the kingdom, God's saving power and presence, available to us. It may not look that impressive, that precious, that valuable, especially when compared to some of the treasures that this present world offers. Jesus even acknowledges that a few verses earlier when he compares the kingdom of God to the tiny mustard seed and the hidden power of yeast. So it's no wonder that with our hearts and minds on valuables that seem to be more urgent, we can easily miss the treasure of God's reign that's right in front of us.

But we dare not miss it. There's too much at stake. Your eternal destiny is on the line. The future toward which you're headed hangs in the balance. The way that you understand your past. The way that you live in the present. All these are shaped and determined by how you respond to God's reign of justice and peace that has arrived in Jesus.

No wonder Jesus says that God's kingdom is like the response of the field worker and the pearl merchant. Neither of them thought the treasure they had found was just something to be examined, analyzed, and admired. No, this treasure was something to be obtained, gained, and experienced. So each of them moved into decisive action. They found. They sold. They bought. By the sequence of their response, they show us that the gift of God's reign that has come to us through Jesus calls for decision and action, so that you too may receive and enter in the life of this kingdom, this gift and treasure that's available to us here and now on this very day.

¹ Dina Abou Salem, "California Couple Finds \$10M in Buried Treasure in Back Yard." ABC News website. February 25, 2014. Accessed June 24, 2015 < <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2014/02/california-couple-finds-10m-buried-treasure-in-back-yard/>>.

² M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 313.

³ Robert Fulgham, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It* (New York: Ivy, 1999). PreachingToday.com. Accessed June 25, 2015 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/search/?type=scripture&query=Matthew%2013:44-46&start=21>>.