

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“It’s Like...: Finding One”

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Matthew 13:44-46

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We’re nearing the end of our series in Matthew 13, this series on Christ’s parables on one of his favorite topics: the kingdom of heaven. We’ll wrap up this series next week before we get into Advent, but I hope that as we’ve gone through these glimpses, we’ve gotten some idea of what Jesus is getting at when he teaches about his kingdom, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven. And as we’ve noted in previous weeks, when he says “kingdom of heaven,” he doesn’t really mean an eternal destination for your soul, but rather God’s rule, God’s reality in the world around us.

In some of the earlier weeks it was all about things that grow: seeds, bushes, trees, even weeds along with it. Last week, it was about yeast being mixed into the dough. This week, in a pair of parables, Jesus offers a glimpse of great value, and not just great value, but the seeking of it. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Matthew 13:44-46

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Years ago I went with some friends on an adventure. It was called Geocaching. And that’s “cache” not as in c-a-s-h, like money, but cache as in c-a-c-h-e. Some of you may have done this before, geocaching. There’s a big database of all these “caches” or small storeplaces. They’re listed with their coordinates, latitude and longitude. Along with it are sometimes some cryptic clues as to where this cache is, because the coordinates will only get in the vicinity.

So my friends and I set off on this little adventure. Nowadays you can just use an app on your phone for the coordinates, but at that point you had to have a dedicated GPS device. We get

to the end of a dirt road, get out of the car, and start walking along paths through the fields, following the GPS to make sure we were on the right track.

We come across an abandoned rail line overgrown with weeds and everything, but it seems to head in the right direction, so we start following it.

The track goes through this odd thicket of undergrowth where we were attacked by the biggest mosquitoes I had ever seen in my life. Big things. Size of a quarter, and they more crunched than squashed when you hit them, and they were all over us, so we started running.

We shake loose of the giant mosquitoes, and just as we get to the right coordinates, we come across an abandoned rail station. This is where the cryptic clues come in. It said, “where trains go when they’re sick,” and we’re thinking “huh?” We’re scouring the rail station, searching everywhere, looking in every room, behind every door, even up on the roof—you know, smart things to do in an abandoned building. Couldn’t find anything, and we’re still trying to think what on earth that clue “where trains go when they’re sick” was supposed to mean.

Until someone discovered a RIP track, a short bit of track that goes off from the main line where an engine or train car could be diverted for repairs. At the end of that short RIP track, we found a small hole with a cover on top. We lifted up the cover and found a small Tupperware container, and inside it, what we had been searching for this whole time, drumroll please: a Pez dispenser, you know those little candies.

The point was, it was utterly forgettable what we found. You see, that was something about geocaching that I didn’t tell you. The caches typically didn’t contain amazing treasures. It’s usually just trinkets, along with a small log book. Our group found our trinket, left our names in the book, traced our steps back, and considered it a good day.

So you might be thinking, well, if the thing in that cache, in that Tupperware container, really wasn’t valuable, and if it’s like that for all of these things, then why on earth do you spend a whole day looking for it, and why is there apparently this big global database for lots of other people to do this exact same thing?

Well, maybe you can guess the answer. There’s something about the search, about the seeking, for this one thing, that’s compelling.

In the pair of parables we read, there’s a thread of discovery in both of them, one of them intended and the other unexpected. First, he says the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, and when someone finds it, then in joy he sells all he has and buys that field, thus obtaining the treasure. Second, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, and when he finds one of great value, he sells everything he has and buys it.

A couple of common threads. There's a discovery of something of great value: the treasure in the field, the pearl of great value. And the one who finds it sells all they have to obtain it.

But a few subtle differences too. In the first, the treasure in the field, the discovery was unexpected, while in the case of the pearl the merchant was actively seeking. But then another difference here that I never noticed before. In the first, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like the treasure hidden in the field, in other words, that which was discovered. So then in the second you'd expect Jesus to say that kingdom was like the pearl, right? But that's not exactly what he says. He says the kingdom is like the merchant in search of it.

Subtle difference, maybe, but I think there's something there. In the first, the kingdom is like what was discovered. In the second, the kingdom is like the one doing the seeking.

It's why I shared that story about geocaching. What's compelling is the search, the seeking itself. It's not a perfect analogy. In geocaching, what you're searching for really isn't of much value at all, like a Pez dispenser and that's not the case in these parables. The treasure in the field is of great value, as is the pearl, so please don't hear me saying that what we are seeking isn't of any consequence. But isn't it interesting that in these two parables, Jesus compares the kingdom to that which is of great value *and* to the one searching for it in the first place?

It's like Jesus is saying that the kingdom of heaven, God's reign, God's reality, is both what you're looking for **and** the looking, and both are of the highest value, so much so that whether it's the plowman or the merchant, they give up everything else just for the sake of this one thing.

In teasing out what Jesus is teaching here, this is why it's so important not to lose sight of what Jesus means by "kingdom of heaven." Like I shared earlier, "kingdom of heaven" isn't an eternal destination for your soul after you die. Jesus talks about that in other ways, but not when he says "kingdom of heaven." He means, "This is God's reality, God's rule, emerging around us." So when we look at these parables, talking about the kingdom of heaven, it means that God's rule, God's reality, the way of the Lord is both of the highest value in and of itself, *and* that seeking that way, searching for it, is just as valuable too, so valuable that if we truly considered it that way, we would give up everything just to follow it.

You could probably guess where all this is heading, because the question becomes pretty stark. Is that what we do? Do we consider the kingdom of heaven, the reality of God, so valuable that it permeates everything and that in all our searching, *that* is what we're seeking out?

Or are we chasing after any number of other things at the same time? No shortage of things that can demand our attention, even potentially good things. Family, friends, school, work. But are our lives truly in sync, truly in alignment with God's kingdom, God's reality, God's way, if

we're seeking out something else first? We can try to tell ourselves we can, but inevitably we find out otherwise.

Throughout my own life, I've perhaps to my detriment been a bit of a cynic, about any number of things, and in my own thought would deconstruct this or that and wonder whether any of it was even worth anything. You can do that. You can have that kind of outlook. Kind of eats itself before long.

But the one thing that I couldn't shake loose of was this hold on my heart, this message of good news, of salvation, of redemption, that no matter what shortcomings I had committed, there was a God who had made me, who loved me, who was drawing me to himself. It took hold of me, and even then, it's hard to purely put that seeking, to put that first in all things, all the time. You get distracted. But the times when things have felt most in sync, most in harmony have been when everything has been put through that lens.

Have you ever felt that way? Like there are so many claims on your time, on your effort, on your heart, that all you feel is the sense of being pulled in a thousand directions and if you take a step back you'd be hard-pressed to say why you're doing any of it? If you've ever felt that, you know what I'm talking about.

And I think it's a bit into that world that Jesus could be speaking here with these parables. Into the cluttered world with so many priorities, finding one that puts all the rest into harmony. That's the kingdom of heaven.

With it being Commitment Sunday, you knew that at some point I was going to bring up money, right? But the exact same thing can happen with our wallets, with our finances as can happen anywhere else, when it feels like there are a thousand claims upon where dollars go. It could mean that there just doesn't seem to be enough, to make ends meet, or it could mean that there seems to be person after person, cause after cause, bill after bill all coming to try to get a piece of it. Then you take a step back and you wonder what the point of it all is.

But what would happen if even in our spending, in our budgets, our finances, we were seeking after God's ways first? Giving up everything to seek after that one thing of great value.

Over the past month and a half, we've been hosting smaller gatherings to talk about the coming year and the stewardship campaign, and inevitably a question will come up, why pledge? Why not just give and not worry about a pledge? What difference does it make in the long run? Well, the very practical reason is that it helps our Session plan our ministry budget, but that's not the most important reason. It's not a financial discipline. First and foremost, it's a spiritual one.

What happens when you make a pledge? I mean it's not a pact signed in blood, for one, we're not sending out people to break thumbs if you don't pay up. But it means that at some point,

within your household, within your own heart, there's been a conversation as to how God is leading you to give. Or maybe another way to put it: how you are dedicating back to God a portion of all he has blessed you with, and doing that first, rather than waiting to see what's left over. It changes things when you do it that way.

Because I don't think there's this requirement that if you do or don't give "x" amount, then God won't love you. Some may be familiar with the practice of tithing, dedicating 10% to God, and that can be a helpful discipline; it's a good conversation to have, but you know what really happens when you have that conversation on how God is leading you to give? It changes the way you think about everything else.

Do you really think that if you dedicated to God a tenth of what he has blessed you with, that you would then think that you were free to be completely selfish with everything else? No, of course not. Embracing that kind of generosity changes your heart, and that ultimately is what God is after. You may have heard me say this before: God doesn't need your money. Never in the history of anything has there ever been a situation when God said, "Well, I was going to do this amazing thing, but Jay didn't cough up the extra \$20 in the offering plate, so I guess the deal's off." Doesn't happen. God doesn't need your money; he wants your heart. And if you think that you can so easily compartmentalize your money from your heart, you are fooling yourself.

But seeking after the kingdom, this thing of great worth, in which even the seeking is a great worth, changes everything else.

A couple of weeks ago, one of you shared with me (and thank you, to this person, for your permission to share this) how you had embraced a new outlook on generosity. And this person, y'all, she shared that she wasn't necessarily Warren Buffet. But nevertheless embraced making sure that the first check she wrote each month was dedicated to God. And you know what she did? She put a Bible verse in her checkbook. Just a simple thing.

You know what that does. It's not just about the check she puts in the offering plate each month or each week. It's about what happens after that. Because then every other check she writes, every other bill she pays is coming through the same lens, part of the same seeking.

Friends, whether it's your wallets or your time or your words, if we're just writing checks, so to speak, to all these different things, we will inevitably feel like we're being pulled in a thousand directions without being able to say much as to why. But if, just if, we find that one thing, the kingdom of heaven, then everything starts to pull together, and even the seeking feels like home. And *that's* what the kingdom of heaven is like.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.