

Campbell – January 9, 2010
Practical Parables Series: 1 – Hidden Treasure and a Pearl
Matthew 13:44-46

I recently read that the mystery novelist, Agatha Christie said that the reason she married an archaeologist was that she was therefore confident that he would become more interested in her as she grew older!

Today's reading contains two short parables, which are sort of a parable within a parable. The parables of Jesus are themselves treasures and pearls which only improve with age. They are the rich core of the teachings of Jesus, and it is vitally important that we all engage them and have a life-long relationship with them.

The parables of Jesus are multi-layered, multi-faceted wisdom stories, designed to be retold and rediscovered on a regular basis. They don't simply contain one moral truth. They are dynamic... they are alive with energy and God's grace.

I'm going to share an interpretation with you this morning which is real and "true" but it is not the only truth contained in these three verses, but even so, it is life-changing.

The first says that *the kingdom of God is like treasure hidden in a field*. Did you read the story of the British guy, David Crisp, who was one of those people who goes out with a metal detector hoping to find ancient treasures, and he stumbled on a cache of more than 52,500 Roman coins, worth at least five million dollars. It does happen. It was a regular conversation in the ancient world to debate who had the moral right to own buried treasure... the person who owned the field or the person who discovered it. You may even want to question whether the subject of the parable had a right to the treasure... should he have just turned it over to the field owner rather than buying the field. But the parable says that he goes and sells all that he has in order to buy the field. Jesus ignores the usual debate in this question and makes another point about the kingdom of heaven.

All the parables, by the way, are about the kingdom of heaven, the central teaching of Jesus.

There is a sense in which you are the field. You are the place where the treasure is buried. God has planted the kingdom firmly within you and is waiting for you to discover it and make its retrieval the highest priority so that the kingdom of heaven may be alive in you. It's not easy and it's not cheap. Indeed, it requires that we each give absolutely everything that we own, everything that we are to enable the kingdom to happen. The kingdom is not a hobby, or a profession, or a particular interest of ours. The kingdom is all-consuming of our time and our energy and our love. *The kingdom of heaven is within you* says Jesus. It not something you have to learn. It's not a program you have to download. You are already programmed to live as an expression of the kingdom of heaven.

There is buried treasure in your soul, and it is way more valuable than David Crisp's Roman coin discovery. You truly have been created in God's image, with God's love and grace, God's generous heart already on your hard drive. It is simply a matter of discovering how

to engage yourself with that treasure trove to bring God's love and grace into the world around you so that the kingdom of heaven become a daily reality for you.

And do you notice the very un-21st century response in the story. We have been so programmed to check things out before making a commitment. We have been so programmed to be anxious, even fearful about risking for the kingdom of heaven that we want to take it a step at a time, checking the truth as we go. No! In this story it says that this "someone" goes in joy to sell all that he has to buy the field... his car, his house, his 401k, his family heirloom... everything, and with joy. He suddenly becomes very unpredictable and makes a major change in his pattern of behavior. His friends and family wonder whether he has taken leave of his senses, risking all of his security for this crazy vision.

But the treasure is so amazing, so wonderful, so valuable, so precious that he knows that he has no choice but to reorient his life and values to ensure that his life is firmly fixed in the kingdom of heaven which God has implanted in his soul.

But wait, as the TV commercials say, ***there is more...***

Paired with the parable about the treasure in the field is the parable of the pearl. It is very easy to read them quickly and assume they are saying the same as each other:

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.

Did you spot the difference?

In the parable of the treasure, the kingdom of heaven is like the treasure. In this parallel parable, the metaphor shifts. The kingdom is not the pearl, which you might expect, *the kingdom of heaven*, it says, *is like a merchant in search of fine pearls*. The kingdom of heaven is not a passive hidden reality like the treasure in the field waiting to be discovered. Instead it is an active force, seeking out priceless pearls. In this parable you are the pearl and the kingdom of heaven is seeking you out, and will sacrifice everything in order to secure you.

You and I are being somehow pursued by the kingdom of heaven because we are precious goods. God does exactly the same thing as the man with the treasure. God is willing to sacrifice everything because God believes that you and I are so precious.

The kingdom of heaven is a personal reality, a spiritual reality. It is an economic reality and a political reality. It is a Jesus reality rooted in a first century Palestinian reality. It is a twenty-first century reality rooted in a California reality and a global reality.

It would be irresponsible of me to keep quiet about the terrible realities of what happened yesterday in Tucson, Arizona. It is difficult to imagine a situation more remote from the realities of treasure in a field and pearls of great value. Whatever political position you take on the immigration debate and the situation in Arizona, hate speech has hit some new

lows and has resulted in terrible violence. All people in political leadership, in all political parties, need to take care with their political rhetoric. There are always disturbed individuals out there who will twist a political message into violent acts. I would ask your prayers for those killed and their families:

Nine-year-old Christian Greene, who was there because she was interested in politics and wanted to meet a congresswoman.

Judge John Roll

Dorwin Stoddard was a 76-year-old member of a local church, whose husband struggled to shield her from the gunman, and three other people.

Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and her family as they await the outcome of her surgery.

I would ask your prayers also for our Bishop in Arizona, Bishop Minerva Carcano, who has been a strong voice on behalf of poor people and immigrants in her area, lifting up the official position of the United Methodist Church.

Minerva knows that there is treasure in her soul and she sees that treasure in the souls of others, including in the souls of those who are her political opponents. Minerva sees the treasure in the souls of those documented and undocumented persons, and all who live in fear in her area.

Our bishop has called all of us to January 22nd at the San Francisco Airport Hyatt in Burlingame. Bishop Carcano will also be here on Friday evening January 21st. If you want to know more please let me know.

When we find treasure in our own souls, we find it in the souls of others. When we find treasure in other people's souls, we become part of the kingdom of heaven movement, reminding other people that they are precious and beautiful in God's sight. This is not only the antidote to fear and hate, but an extraordinary expression of god's grace at work in the world.