

“Buried Treasure”

“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 (Matthew 13:44).”

We are instinctively self-centered creatures. The fact is that we experience and often make sense of life by placing ourselves at the center of the story, even when the story has nothing to do with us. It is one of our most powerful default settings. We even do this with Scripture, often interpreting what we read with these same egocentric eyes. And when we do this with the Bible, we can miss the true meaning and message that God has for us.

Today’s text once again opens with Jesus saying to his disciples, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” It’s a phrase we’ve heard a lot lately as we’ve moved through Matthew’s Gospel and, as I said two weeks ago when I preached on the Parable of the Sower, this phrase, “The Kingdom of heaven is like...” is designed to help us understand the parable that follows as a description of God’s action in the world. In other words, “the Kingdom of heaven is like...” is a God-centered introduction telling us that what’s going to happen in the story is about God’s work, not ours.

So, again today, Jesus begins the parable with this phrase, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” He then goes on to tell the simple story of a man who finds a treasure buried in a field, then in utter joy, the man goes and sells everything he has so that he can buy the field, securing the treasure as his own.

Usually, when we hear a parable, we automatically start to assign meaning to the different elements of the story as they relate to us. In other words, we interpret the parable from a self-centered perspective, and so, for many of us (and in many of the commentaries about this parable), our interpretation goes something like this: *We* are the man at the center of the story; we are the one doing the work. The treasure is God, or faith, or Christ Himself, and once we have made this incredible discovery – once we’ve “found” the treasure – we should quickly get rid of all the things in our lives that are distracting or sinful, so that we can fully embrace the new spiritual treasure we have found.

Now, you may have come up with a completely different meaning for this story, but I think it’s fair to say that this basic understanding is the natural way we interpret the parable. And there’s a huge problem with this application. When we place ourselves at the center of the story, we miss the truth that Jesus is teaching here. You see, according to Scripture, *we* don’t find God. In fact, if we examine God’s Word carefully, we quickly see that not only do we *not* find God, we *can’t* find God. In a day when the Christian church in America uses the term “seeker” like it’s common Biblical language, we need to be clear about God’s picture of our ability to find Him. The apostle Paul tells us, “the sinful mind is hostile to God” (Romans 8:7). The prophet Isaiah writes, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way” (53:6). And in the book of Romans we are told, “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, (and) no one who seeks God” (Romans 3:10-11). The Bible couldn’t put it more plainly; finding God is not something *we* do.

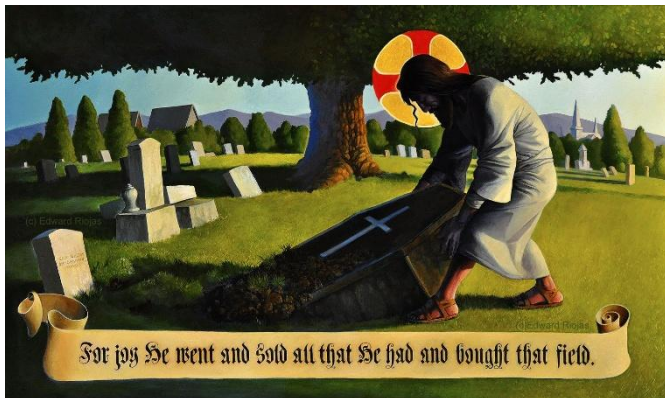
We may be seekers, but our seeking has nothing to do with God. We spend our lives seeking out ways to satisfy our own desires. We look for things that meet our needs, and we search for experiences that make us comfortable. Whether it has to do with our schedules or our checkbooks, our talents or our temperament, we always seek pleasure over pain, and we choose to satisfy ourselves rather than serve others. The truth is that seeking spiritual treasure is impossible for us, and even Christians can quickly turn from a life of humility grounded in grace and become like the prideful Pharisees that Jesus so frequently condemned.

This is not a pretty picture, and yet the message in this parable is that through the fog of our sin God seeks us out. Again and again He comes to us, cutting through the hardness of our selfish hearts, smashing the walls that we have built to keep Him out, and He finds us! He uncovers us and sees us through the lens of His Son Who suffered for our misdeeds, Who died for our transgressions, and redeemed us from the curse of sin. So when God looks at us, in Christ, He sees treasure.

My friends, in this parable Jesus tells us that, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field (Matthew 13:44).” As unreasonable as it may sound to our self-centered ears, God is the man in the parable. And as unbelievable as it may seem to us, that is how God feels about His creation. His love for us is so great that He would “in His joy” give everything, sending to earth His one and only Son to buy us back, to redeem us from sin, and save us from hell, and give us life. This is the love that God has for us! This is the love that God has for you!

Today’s parable proclaims to us that it is God who seeks, it is God who chooses, it is God who has set us apart to be His people, and today’s reading from Deuteronomy furthers this God-centered truth as it proclaims: “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you” (Deuteronomy 7:6-7). And because of His love for you have been set apart, you have been made holy, and you have been found; not because you deserved it, earned it or even asked for it; you have been found because of God’s love for you in Christ, and in today’s lesson from Romans, Paul tells us that there is nothing... nothing... absolutely nothing that can separate you from this fierce, relentless, agape love.

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Pastor Sheafer’s 10th anniversary at Emmanuel, and one of the gifts we gave him to commemorate this milestone was a print from the artist Edward Riojas. Riojas is an LCMS Lutheran whose artistic talent is matched by his theological acumen. The print we presented to Pastor Dan was a depiction of today’s parable, and not only does Riojas understand that Christ is the actor in the story, but he also takes it one step further, picturing the Risen Christ retrieving the treasure hidden in the field as He pulls a casket out of the ground



This is what it means to be found by God. This is what it means to be His treasured possession. It means that we can face the difficulties of this world, and even the reality of the grave, knowing that, “neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39). You belong to God, and you are His treasured possession. This Christ-centered truth is a message worth rejoicing over, and this story of a God who finds

buried treasure is the story of your salvation. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God’s people say, “Amen.”

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