

Receive the Treasure

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Priceless Pearl

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. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. Matthew 13:44-46

This Lent we are listening to Jesus' parables in the light of his Passion. It has been interesting already to see how what we bring to each parable, in this case the suffering of Jesus, can impact the parable's meaning.

Jesus' parables are often very easy to interpret. Sometimes it's as easy as "A is like B," a comparison is made between a spiritual truth and an everyday story or event. At other times Jesus simply tells us what the story means. We like it when the meaning of a parable is straightforward and simple.

Many times, though, interpreting one of Jesus' parables can be challenging because the meaning is not all that clear. So people may walk away with different interpretations, perhaps complementary but not exactly the same. Someone might say, though, "Well, which is it? They can't both be right." Actually, they may both be right if Jesus has given the listeners the freedom to bring their unique perspective to one of his stories.

We sometimes read the Bible this way. We bring what Martin Luther called our *tentatio*, our personal experience and trials, to a Scripture text, and God speaks to those trials. Pastors hear this all the time. Someone thanks a pastor for a marvelous sermon which said this or that, and the pastor is thinking, "I don't think I ever said this or that," but the person listening heard it because she brought a particular perspective to the preaching. Others may have never heard "this or that."

The two parables of the hidden treasure and the priceless pearl are like that. The parables have the same story line—something very valuable is found, and the finder sells everything to own what has been found. Over the centuries, those listening to these parables have come away with two meanings. Both meanings are confirmed in other

passages of Scripture. Both meanings are as true as true can be. If Jesus had any one of them in mind, he does not say.

So for us it is as if two people are looking at a series of paintings in a gallery, showing Jesus in his Passion. The two look in as Jesus is arrested in Gethsemane. They see him beaten and flogged. They watch him mocked and spit upon. Another painting shows him crowned with thorns and wearing a scarlet robe on his shoulders. They look in as he is led to the cross where, they know, he will lay down his life for them.

Then they hear Jesus' stories of the hidden treasure and the priceless pearl. A man finds a treasure hidden in a field. He sells all he has to buy the field and own the treasure. A merchant in search of a fine pearl finds one and sells all he has to own that pearl. Because they have brought different needs to the paintings and the parables, each of these two onlookers walks away with a different message. Both their messages, though, are rich and real and true.

The first person has struggled for many years with feelings of worthlessness. She remembers an adult telling her as a teenager that she would never amount to much. Her job seems menial and inconsequential and her boss's constant criticism doesn't help any. She wonders if anyone really loves her anymore. Her husband and children seem to be so busy, and she feels more like a maid than a wife and a mother. For this person, as she watches Jesus go painfully to the cross, she hears his parable saying that she is the treasure, she is the priceless pearl. For her Jesus sold everything. He laid down his life for her. She is worth that much to Jesus. He loves her that much. This message of Jesus' parable addresses her self-pity and doubt. She finds herself immensely valuable not only to Jesus but also to her family and her colleagues at work.

The other person looking at the paintings of Jesus' Passion has a different take on his parables of the hidden treasure and priceless pearl. For him these parables seal what he has always felt but now can more fully express: Jesus Christ is the priceless treasure of his life. He does not see himself as the treasure in the parable, but Jesus. Jesus' sacrificial love has made Jesus this man's most treasured

“possession.” He looks and realizes that Jesus did all this suffering because of his sins, and it overwhelms him. An old German hymn by Johann Franck and Johann Cruger says it well, “Jesus, priceless treasure, Source of purest pleasure, Truest friend to me ...”

For you, one of these two meanings may be the one that meets your needs. Just know that you are worth everything to Jesus and that being so loved I will not be surprised to hear you say that Jesus is the treasure of your heart. Amen.

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