

Treasure Hunt
Matthew 13: 44-53
Jon Frost

“As I have gone alone in there / And with my treasures bold,
I can keep my secret where / And hint of riches new and old.
Begin it where warm waters halt / And take it in the canyon down,
Not far, but too far to walk. / Put in below the home of Brown.

These are the first 2 of 6 stanzas from a poem written by Forest Fenn, an 87 year old former Vietnam fighter pilot and art dealer, which he included in his self published memoir entitled “The Thrill of the Chase.” His poem is perhaps the most significant clue as to the whereabouts of a treasure chest worth millions that he hid in 2010 somewhere in the Rockies between Sante Fe, NM and the Canadian border.

The treasure chest is about a square foot in size and is filled with emeralds, rubies, gold coins, and diamonds that Fenn collected during expeditions as a self-taught archaeologist. As someone whose childhood imagination was profoundly shaped by the movie Goonies, perhaps the quintessential treasure hunt movie, I couldn't help but go down a rabbit hole of articles and blogs about the thousands of people who have upended their lives in search of this treasure.

This is the imagery Jesus draws upon in the first 2 parables we heard moments ago. In both, something of great value is found. In the first, there is no indication that the one who found the treasure had been looking for it. But they find it, hide it again in the field, and then sell everything they have in order to buy that field. In the second, the merchant had been searching for fine pearls and then found THE one. Likewise, he sells all that he has to buy that pearl of great value.

Their actions may seem a little peculiar to outside observers; why is this guy investing everything in this apparently unremarkable field? Is this pearl really worth everything? This, Jesus says, is what the kingdom of heaven is like. When reading these kingdom parables, it is important to remember that the kingdom is like the whole parable, not just one feature of it. So, the kingdom of heaven is not just like the treasure or the pearl, it is like the whole experience of finding something of immense value and giving everything you have for its sake. So how is the kingdom like this?

The treasure hidden in a field and the pearl of great value is none other than the gospel of the kingdom which Jesus was announcing in his teaching, actions and ministry as a whole. But even in saying that, it's worth unpacking the words 'kingdom' and 'gospel' to clarify what we mean by them. They are so integral to an understanding of the New

Testament. They are also so intertwined with one another that to me it seems impossible to talk about one without the other. I like the way pastor and writer Brian Zahnd talks about both in his recent book “Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God.”

He writes, “the gospel is the joyful proclamation that the kingdom of God has arrived with the incarnation, [death] and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” It is “the audacious announcement that Jesus is Lord and that the world is to now be reconfigured around his gracious rule.” It is the “beautiful story of how God is bringing the world out of bondage to sin and death through the triumph of Jesus Christ.” As followers of Jesus, that is our treasure! The gospel in all its fullness.

This definition flies in the face of what we have tended to do with the words ‘gospel’ and ‘kingdom’ in our context in North America - and that is to mostly emphasize their future aspects as well as privatizing, individualizing, and de-materializing them. In this reduction, Christian spirituality becomes primarily something between me and God and matters mostly in terms of where I will end up when I die while getting nervous with words like justice and social action.

The kingdom of heaven Jesus talks about is the reign and rule of God that comes from heaven and breaks into the present lives of those who have ears to hear to form a new people in a new way of life centered around Jesus. While Scripture certainly doesn’t ignore the future implications of the gospel, it seems to me that there is far greater emphasis on the gospel’s call to respond in the here and now.

And we see that in these first two parables. Both protagonists go all in because of the treasure they have found. But that’s hard for us, isn’t it? Isn’t there some aspect of our life that we can keep and maintain as solely ours?

In his classic “Mere Christianity,” CS Lewis writes, “The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self —all your wishes and precautions —to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call “ourselves,” to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be “good.” We hope that when the demands of the gospel have been met, our “poor natural self will still have some chance, and some time, to get on with its own life and do what it likes.”

The response required by the advent of the gospel of Jesus Christ is a total response, demanding, as the great Isaac Watts hymn puts it, “my soul, my life, my all.”

Continuing the sense of urgency, the third parable in our passage takes a sudden ominous turn with undertones of judgment. Really, the whole 13th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel has this sense. Some of Jesus’s hearers will embrace his message and some will not. His crucifixion is case and point in this reality. But the parable of the net is a stark reminder that throughout the lifespan of the church until the end of the age, there will be those who refuse to orient their lives around the way of Jesus’s kingdom. They will be like bad fish the fishermen throw away. There is an urgency in our initial

response to finding that the treasure of the gospel is ours for the taking. And there is an urgency in continuing to be faithful stewards of that treasure until the end.

We can take our clue for what being faithful stewards looks like from verse 52. As God's people, trained for the kingdom of heaven, we bring out of our treasure what is new and what is old. Today is kind of a pivot Sunday - in a few minutes we will bring forward our pledges as we sing the final hymn. As we do, the question I ask - of myself - of all of us - is "are we all in?" Does our support of the ministry of this congregation reflect our wholehearted commitment? Because it is bigger than just about supporting programs or operations. It is about the belief that this place is an outpost of the kingdom of heaven, bearing witness to the fact that Jesus is Lord and through us he is making all things new. Are you all in?

Beginning next Sunday we'll pivot from stewardship to vision. A scribe, as Matthew uses the word, was someone learned in Scripture and tradition who could then offer an interpretation. Over the last several months our Vision Quest team members have been cultural scribes in our community. They have held extensive conversations with this congregation but have also spoken with a broad range of organizations and individuals outside of these walls in order to offer an interpretation on where God is calling us.

The whole process was built on the recognition that there is great strength in the ministry of this congregation. So, as we roll out the vision over the next several weeks, it will feel a lot like how Matthew describes it - there will be treasure that is new as well as old. Four God-sized dreams, so named because we cannot bring them to fruition on our own. We have to be led by God's Spirit giving us the wisdom and creativity that each requires.

So, first - we expand our witness. We seek ways to intentionally invite all people to a faith journey with Jesus Christ because the treasure we have found is too valuable to keep it to ourselves.

Second, we serve our neighbors. We lead the way in responding to the needs of our community. We will pour ourselves out seeking to address crises such as mental health, addiction, and gun violence because we believe the kingdom of heaven is now and the work of the kingdom is bringing people out of bondage from whatever presently binds them.

Third, we work toward affordable housing. We take a leadership role in addressing homelessness and the lack of affordable housing in our community because all people should have a safe place to live.

Lastly, we equip our emerging generation. We create space where the dreams of young people can be shared and celebrated, where they share in the ministry of the Church because they are not just the Church of tomorrow, they are the Church of today and their hopes, dreams, and visions matter.

One of the reasons Forest Fenn gave as to why he hid his treasure in the first place was that in the midst of an economic recession at the time of hiding it, he wanted to give

people some hope. But it sure seems like he could give a lot of people a lot of hope in some immediately tangible ways that would benefit the world around him, right? Sure, the payoff may be exciting if it's ever found. But what about right now?

This is the vision. Expand our witness - Serve our neighbors - Work towards affordable housing - Equip our emerging generation. And this is what we support with our tithes and pledges. The vision calls us to go all in at this particular cultural moment for the sake of God's kingdom which has already arrived in the person of Jesus Christ, and everything we do points to the day when it will fully come.

Amen.

Resources:

Blumberg, Yoni. "An 87-Year-Old Millionaire Buried Treasure in the Rockies-and He's Offered One Main Clue." CNBC, CNBC, 18 Apr. 2018, www.cnbc.com/2018/04/17/millionaire-forrest-fenn-hid-treasure-in-the-rockies-and-left-a-clue.html.

Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. Harpercollins Publishers, 2017.

Zahnd, Brian. *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: the Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News*. WaterBrook, 2017.