



A Treasured Faith **Matthew 13:44-46, 26:6-13**

We love stories about finding treasures. The popularity of *Antiques Roadshow* attests to that fact as hundreds of people bring in their yard-sale finds, or the painting passed down from Grandmother, or a photo signed by Babe Ruth.

Some of the *Antiques Roadshow* stories are about surprising finds. One story that stuck in my head was about a woman who had just moved to Tucson and saw a jar lying by the side of the road. She stopped her car to investigate and saw that it had a Native American design on it. Though it had chips and blemishes, she liked it and took it home. After many years, she gave it to her niece. The niece thought it might be worth \$100, but it turns out it was a pot made in 1880 to 1890 by the Zuni Tribe, unusually large, and was worth about \$25,000.

In our first scripture today, a man makes a surprising find.

A man—we'll call him Amos—finds a treasure in a field. Maybe Amos was plowing, and he hit something hard, or maybe he was walking along, saw the sunlight reflecting off an object, and being curious, investigated, digging in the earth with his hands. But in any event, Amos discovers a treasure, makes sure no one is watching, and re-buries the treasure so no one else will find it. In his joy, Amos goes and sells all that he has and buys the field. The parable is a bit shocking from Jesus' lips, because "finders keepers, losers weepers" is not a tenet of faith as Jesus taught.

The treasure-finder Amos, in his excitement, clearly has not thought the issue through. What if the treasure is hot property, some stolen booty which will be hard to hock? What if the former owner of the field finds out that treasure was on the property, and, therefore legally his? The former owner will be none too pleased. He'll come after Amos through the courts or with a weapon. This is a surprising parable coming from Jesus' lips, because "finders keepers, losers weepers" was not a tenet of the faith Jesus taught.

Then there is a pearl merchant who is always searching for fine pearls. Pearls were the diamonds of the ancient world. This merchant finds a pearl of great value, and he also sells all that he has and buys the pearl.

Can you imagine the reaction of the pearl merchant's wife when he gets home? "You did what?! You sold everything we own for this one pearl? What were you thinking? The taxes on this pearl alone will be huge. How are we going to pay the mortgage this month?! What were you thinking?"

The reaction of the disciples is equally angry when the woman comes and anoints Jesus' head with very expensive perfume. One Gospel tells us it was a pound, 16 ounces, of perfume. With perfume, a little dab will do you. You could probably smell a pound of perfume all over the neighborhood. "Why this waste?" the disciples exclaim. "This perfume could have been sold for a large sum of money and given to the poor!"

But the point of these stories is not about net profit gain, wise investment or prudent actions. It is about extravagant grace and extravagant response. The kingdom of heaven is like finding a treasure. The kingdom of God is like finding an extraordinary pearl.

This kingdom of God is being encountered by Jesus and realizing down deep in our bones that we are loved, accepted, changed. The kingdom of God is like a cocaine addict turning her life over to her higher power and getting clean and sober and beginning life anew. The kingdom of God is like a multi-millionaire who realizes that his work is ruining his soul and his marriage. Then, after soul-searching and prayer, he sells his business and finds joy in starting Habitat for Humanity. The treasure is finding a life worth living in Jesus.

I asked several members of our church this week to say, just off the top of their heads, what they treasure in their faith. The responses were as varied as the people—"Jesus loves me, this I know," God's forgiveness, Christian community, the love of neighbor, making a difference in the lives of others, finding meaning and purpose in God.

- A teenager, asked about his summer, responded that going on the mission trip was the best thing he had ever done and he couldn't wait to go on another.
- One woman said, "After all these years of seeking God and responding to God's call in going to Nicaragua, tutoring at George Mason and in being in an on-going small Bible study group, after all these years I truly get it that God loves me. And over the years I've seen so many people transformed."
- In an email, a retired executive wrote, "As a sinner, I struggle constantly with how far short I fall in living the way God would have me live. My faith is such a comfort. Knowing that as much of a knucklehead as I am, God not only loves me, but he died so that I may have eternal life. What a wonderful thing to remember in dark times! Life is difficult. Bad things happen, we are heartbroken, we are devastated, we feel alone, but we are not alone, and the knowledge that God is walking with us is so uplifting."

- Another person wrote, “What I treasure is a sense of purpose and that as insignificant as I may be in the grand scheme of things, there is a plan. For all my shortcomings and the world’s shortcomings, there is something good and right at the center.”

Of course, there are days when it is difficult to believe that there is something good and right in the center. There has been heart-breaking news this week of the Norway massacre and the devastating famine in Somalia made more ghastly by civil war. But in the presence of evil, faith can bring a remarkable hope and strength.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa was interviewed when apartheid laws were raging their hatred towards black South Africans. Tutu said, “When the white people arrived, we had the land, and they had the Bible. They said, ‘Let us pray.’ When we opened our eyes, they had the land, and we had the Bible. And we got the better of the deal.” (Greg Jones, “Africa and the Bible,” www.episcopalcafe.com, July 28, 2007)

What do you treasure about faith? What sustains you?

The kingdom of God is like finding a treasure for which we will give everything, throwing caution to the wind. Really? I actually find these parables uncomfortable and challenging. The treasure-finder and the merchant give all that they have to hold onto the treasure—the treasure which is a living relationship with Jesus.

The thought of giving all that we are, all that we have, to God can feel overwhelming. For many of us, daily prayer, regular Bible study, service and weekly worship are a struggle. One national study found that only 31 percent of Christians read the Bible privately on at least a weekly basis. (from Myers Park Presbyterian Church website) But without prayer and Bible study, service and worship, our hold on the treasure of a relationship with God begins to slip. So let’s think in terms of baby steps we can take on our journey of faith.

Read the Gospel of Mark this week. Find a story about Jesus that speaks to you, and read it over and over again. Or commit ten minutes each day in prayer, thanking God for the blessings of the day. Or read your child a Bible story each night in addition to other stories. Pray for your enemy. Return good for evil once this week. Do one thing to make someone else’s life better. Take a baby step.

Taking baby steps can help us hold onto the treasure of being in a living relationship with Jesus. It helps us remember that God loves us dearly.

The woman extravagantly anoints Jesus with costly perfume. Jesus tells the disciples to quit fussing at the woman and leave her alone, for she has prepared him ahead of time for his burial.

As the sweet scent of perfume fills the air of the house and wafts out into the neighborhood, we are reminded that God’s love is sweet and precious; that God will go to any lengths to reach

us, even death on a cross. It is the love of God for us in Jesus Christ that is priceless. It is a treasure worth holding on to.

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