

Treasures New and Old

In the name of him through whom we are more than conquerors, dear friends in Christ: In today's Gospel Jesus relates three short parables, all of which begin with the same phrase: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like ..." With these words Jesus informs us that there is some point of comparison to be understood between the images he describes and the spiritual kingdom that is his holy Church. These three parables are part of a larger collection in the 13th chapter of Saint Matthew's Gospel, which we've been following for a while now. The first we heard two weeks back. It was the Parable of the Sower and the Soils, about how the seed of God's Word grows (or doesn't) in various people who hear it. Last week we had the Parable of the Weeds in the Wheat, about how both the righteous and the wicked grow side by side in this world together, and how at the end of the age the angels will separate them, gathering up the faithful righteous into heavenly grain bins, and consigning the unbelieving wicked to eternal flames.

Today's three parables complete the collection; but before we get to them, I want to jump to the end of the reading where Jesus asks his disciples if they've understood his parables – they say yes, eagerly nodding their heads – and then Jesus concludes with these remarkable words, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." He's telling them that there's more to these parables than they think. Indeed, when studying the teachings of Jesus or God's Word in all of Scripture, there's always more going on than you're going to catch the first time by. A scribe trained for the kingdom, what we would call a Christian theologian, someone who studies and teaches God's Word, when he goes to work on a passage of sacred Scripture he's going to find initially what's right there on the surface, what we might call the old established explanations of what the text means. But he's also going to find something new, some fresh insight or connection that he hadn't seen before. And we should rather expect this. After all, in Scripture we are dealing with the mind of God. It would be silly to think that one could plumb the depths of his thoughts with just a single exposure (or two, or three). In the treasury of God's Word there are vast numbers of gems both old to admire and new to discover. And please don't misunderstand me: I'm not suggesting as some do that in the texts of sacred Scripture there are secret messages written in code waiting to be deciphered, nor am I saying that we can radically reinterpret passages to come up with strange new doctrines. No, any new insights we discover will come from the plain meaning of the words on the page and will only reinforce and enrich our understanding of the timeless truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

With this in mind, then, let's dive into the parables before us this morning with the expectation that we will indeed discover treasures new and old. The first two, the parables of *The Treasure in the Field* and what's commonly called the *Pearl of Great Price* are very similar. In both we have someone searching for something of great value who then, when he discovers it, goes out and sells all he has in order to possess it. The meaning seems simple enough, for what is worth more than the Kingdom of God? Discovering the Gospel of Christ crucified for sinners, being united with Jesus through Baptism and made a child and heir of God, having all your sins forgiven and being granted eternal life in paradise—who could put a price on that? And what fool wouldn't be willing to give everything he has to possess it?

This is what we would call the "old treasure". It's the time honored, standard explanation of the two parables. And it's perfectly legitimate. We just sang it in the last hymn: *Your kingdom, O God, is my glorious treasure, My pearl of incomparable worth. Its value exceeds*

ev'ry standard of measure, Surpassing the wealth of the earth – so obviously it passed the test for Lutheran orthodoxy; otherwise it wouldn't be in the hymnal.

It's a good interpretation; but unfortunately one in which we can find no comfort, for which of us has actually done that – given everything we own to possess it? I asked before what fool wouldn't be willing to; the answer is a fool like me, a fool like you. It reminds me of the time a rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked him what he had to do to inherit God's kingdom. Jesus told him to keep the commandments. The man replied, "Oh, I've done that. I've kept all the commands since I was a child. What do I still lack?" It's clear he didn't have a Lutheran understanding of sin. Jesus had to show him that, so he told him, "All right, go out and give all you have to the poor, and come follow me. You will have treasures in heaven." The man went away broken hearted, because he wasn't willing to do that. His love of his possessions, the life of ease he enjoyed – he wasn't willing to part with them. And neither are we.

Now, Jesus told him this not to say, "To get into God's kingdom you must give everything away"; but rather to show him that he wasn't keeping the commandments like he thought he was. The first command is to have no other gods before the Lord; but he did. His wealth was his god. That's what he trusted in. The second table of the law is summed up by the words "love your neighbor as yourself"; but he didn't. He loved himself more than the poor. That's why he wasn't willing to share his riches with them.

The big problem was with his question, "What must I *do* to inherit God's kingdom?" The answer is keep God's commands. Be sinless. Be perfect. Anything less than that means you don't get in. And when we understand the parables of the Treasure and the Pearl to mean you must give all you have to possess God's kingdom, that's what they tell us too: you're not getting in. You're a sinner. Everything you have and do falls short of God's command. So there is nothing you can do or give to save yourself. If we understand these parables as Law, that is, what God requires of us, then they condemn us. And that's right: the Law always condemns us because we don't keep it. So the old, time honored interpretation is good; but it's bad news for us. And that should lead us to look for another way.

Time for something new. Let's look at the parables again. Did it occur to you that the guy in the first parable is a thief? What's he doing sneaking onto someone else's property with a shovel looking for buried treasure? And then when he finds it, he hides it again so that he can cheat the field's owner out of the true value of his land. Is Jesus telling us to be dishonest? And what? When we find God's kingdom, we're supposed to hide it? Does that make sense? What happened to let your light shine before men? Go tell the good news? Make disciples of all nations?

Something else that occurred to me; I noticed it from looking at the picture on the bulletin. Pearls come from oysters. That's not a surprise; but remember who it is that's hearing Jesus when he first tells this parable. They're Jews. To them oysters were strictly forbidden. They were considered unclean; all shellfish were. So here's this thing of immense value that comes from an unclean source. Jesus could have said the merchant was looking for diamonds or rubies or some other gemstone; but he picked the one that comes from something his hearers knew to be unclean (and that in my opinion are pretty disgusting too).

We tried looking at these parables as Law, what God requires of us; but let's turn it around and reinterpret them as Gospel, that is, what God does *for* us. Then we would cast the Lord as the guy with the shovel and the merchant looking for pearls. The field would be the

world, which doesn't belong to him, by the way. It currently belongs to Satan. The Scriptures call the devil the prince of this earth. And when Satan tempted Jesus, telling him that he'd give him the world and all its kingdoms if he fell down and worshipped him, Jesus didn't argue with him about his claim to ownership. He recognized that he was trespassing on Satan's property; but he refused to be seduced by the temptation. He didn't come to exchange his loyalty to his Father in order to buy a world cursed by sin; he came to keep his Father's commands and redeem the world from the curse of sin. He came in search of treasure. And he found it hidden in the field.

That would be us. And we are indeed a *hidden* treasure; one from an unclean source. It goes beyond amazing that the Lord sees anything of value in us; we who sin and rebel against him constantly. And yet he sees us not for what we are; but rather for what we will become when he takes us as his own and makes all things new. And to acquire this hidden treasure for himself, this pearl of great price, he gladly gives all that he has: his body, his blood, his Spirit, his very life upon the cross to redeem us from the curse of our sin. He pays the price we never could.

As a result, at the end of the age when his angels cast the vast dragnet that will gather all people to stand before the Judge, we who know that we cannot save ourselves, who have been led to repentance for our sins, and who trust in Jesus Christ and his work of salvation for us will be on his right hand. Then we will hear him speak the words, "Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." And there living with the Lord Jesus and learning to know him for all eternity we will never cease to discover and cherish wondrous treasures new and old. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!