

Sermon Draft (July 30, 2023) for Randy

Text: Matthew 13:44–52

Sermon: “The Kingdom of Heaven”

The three parables in our text are the last in a series of kingdom parables in Matthew 13. The final verses serve as a literary cap. Verse 53 transitions from this teaching section with the formula, ***“And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there.”*** Throughout his Gospel, Matthew skillfully alternates between Jesus' words (teaching) and his works (miracles). The kingdom parables in Matthew 13 began with the parable of the sower and a statement about the purpose of the parables. Parables are intended to be opaque to unbelief but transparent to faith, calling to faith while frustrating unbelief, ***“because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand”*** (13:13). The disciples receive insight from Jesus (13:16–23), but the crowds do not. The kingdom parables in order of appearance are the sower, wheat field, mustard seed, leavened dough, hidden treasure, precious pearl, and dragnet.

Together, these give us a picture of the kingdom of God as a universal (catholic) kingdom embracing the whole world. It is vulnerable, open to attack by enemies, gracious, patient, forgiving, of infinite value, hidden under weakness, and ultimately vindicated in the sorting and separation of faith and unbelief at the end of the age.

Today's Gospel delivers three parables for the price of one. A bargain at the price! Parables are little simile stories, comparing the kingdom of heaven to common things on earth—seeds, soil, pearls, fishing nets. They are intended to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom to faith but hide them from unbelief, making the hearer dependent on Jesus. Today, the kingdom of heaven is compared to buried treasure, a pearl-seeking merchant, a dragnet trolling the waters. So, what's the point? The Kingdom of Heaven is hidden, costly, and universal. It is literally “to die for.”

“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” (v 44).

What does this mean?

First, it means that the kingdom of heaven is hidden from plain sight like buried treasure. People have walked right over it, picnicked on it, or planted grain on it for years, not knowing the treasure that was buried under the soil. The kingdom of heaven is hidden to the eyes of this world. To the world, the kingdom looks like simple water, a preacher in a robe, eucharistic bread and wine, and a Jewish carpenter from Galilee who had the misfortune of being crucified. The glory is hidden, like the glory of Jesus' divinity hidden under the humility of manger and cross, or, for that matter, our glory as new creations in Christ hidden under the old Adamic flesh.

Hidden is another way of saying “sacrament” or “mystery.” What is hidden must be revealed, told to you, or you wouldn’t know it. And so the kingdom of heaven, though really present, is revealed only to faith. You must hear and believe. There’s nothing to see. As the catechism teaches, the kingdom comes when the Word is preached, heard, believed, and lived. But it is not seen.

Second, the hidden treasure gives value to the whole field. Were you or I to stumble across that buried treasure in the field, we’d simply come back under cover of darkness at night and cart the treasure off with no one the wiser and we all the richer. That’s the way we’d handle it. But that’s not the way the kingdom of heaven operates. The man literally buys the whole farm—dilapidated barn, rundown house, collapsing shed, and a rusty broken-down tractor. Instead of redeeming the redeemable and salvaging the salvageable, Jesus comes and dies for the whole inclusive world.

And he literally buries his death and life in the world as hidden treasure, giving infinite value to the whole thing. The only thing that pleases God in this world is the death and resurrection of his Son by which all things are reconciled to him. In other words, the world is precious to God for Jesus' sake. And only for Jesus' sake.

Again, Jesus says, a second parable, *“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of [infinitely] great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it”* (vs 45–46).

The problem with this parable is that we get distracted by the pearl and hear it as *“the kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great price,”* which is so priceless you must give up everything to have it. Which is true, but not the point. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking pearls. Imagine a Middle Eastern pearl dealer working the vendors in the jewelry market. He bargains, he wheels, he deals, looking for the best pearl at the best price.

But then he finds the one, the pearl of pearls, the rarest and finest that ever popped from an oyster. And for the sheer joy of owning it, he literally sells everything he has.

Rather than taking you through a tour of all the ways this parable has been interpreted down through the ages, let me just remind you of a familiar verse: **“God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son”** (John 3:16). The kingdom of heaven is like the seeking love of God, who searches high and low for that one pearl of infinite value, the apple of his eye, the world he created and loves, and, finding it, gives everything he has, his only-begotten Son, in order to make it his treasured possession.

We think we can bargain with God. We think we’re the shrewd merchant who works through all the pearls of the religious jewelry market and, having found Jesus, gives up everything to own him. We always want to be the hero of the parable. But the parable exposes old Adam’s religion for the counterfeit coin that it is.

Do you really want to buy the farm to own the treasure? Do you really want to give up everything to follow Jesus? A rich young ruler, when posed with that prospect, turned and went home with a long face. We can't scoff at him and say we'd never do the same.

Thankfully, this is not about us making good choices. It's about God's choice to seek and save us. It's about the love of God in Christ that stops at nothing to rescue the world from sin and death. It's about the God who works hiddenly and mysteriously, in, with, and under the things of this world to redeem the world. And it's about your value to God. You are precious to God for Jesus' sake. You are worth his only Son, his shed blood, his innocent suffering and death. That's what he paid to redeem you, to make you his own so that you might live under him in his kingdom.

A third parable: "*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind*" (v 47).

The kingdom of heaven is like a net cast out into the sea—a big, wide, and very indiscriminately catholic net that hauls in everything—good fish, bad fish, old tires, shoes, hubcaps, whatever. The entire world in all its goodness, badness, and ugliness. No one and nothing is outside the net of Jesus' death and resurrection. He's very literally got the “whole world in his hands” when those hands are nailed to the cross.

We would have thought that God might have been a bit more selective in the resurrection roundup. Line fishing instead of net fishing. But God's ways are not our ways. ***“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable!”*** (Romans 11:33). He drags the whole world, the entire cosmos, into one dark death on a cross and then out of that death raises up a new creation. Then and only then can good and evil be properly sorted.

And please note, dear sinner-saints, that the line separating evil and righteous runs right through each of us. We're deeply grateful that the net drags in everybody, because if it picked up only what's good, we'd be left out.

Rather, we see that you are of great value to God. A priceless, precious pearl. You may feel worthless, and the world may have no appreciation for your value. You may look around and feel insignificant, nothing but a grain of sand or dust in the wind. But you are to die for, as this world is to die for. God bought you when you knew him not. He saved you before you ever got the notion of being saved. He rescued you before you called for help. He redeemed you while you were still dead in sin and death.

That's the kingdom of heaven, whose King is crucified and risen, who takes away the sin of the world. And your sin. That hidden, costly, all-embracing kingdom is yours in Christ, your birthright in Baptism as God's own child.

You have been caught in the kingdom's net together, this world's prodigal sons and daughters, to be dragged to the shores of resurrection and, by the grace of God and his mercy in Jesus, to rise as saints and kingdom citizens, his treasured possession, his priceless pearl.

What, again, is the kingdom of heaven like? It is to die for.

Amen