

Earthly Stories, Heavenly Meanings: The Treasure

Second Sunday after Epiphany,
January 18, 2009

We're continuing with our series, "Earthly Stories, Heavenly Meanings" today as we continue to look at some of the parables of Jesus. Because of the weather last weekend, many people were not able to come to church, so I want to take just a minute to review the series and what we're going to be doing.

Starting last Sunday and going until Lent (which starts in just five weeks) we'll be looking at some of the parables Jesus used when teaching. We'll look at the context of the parables, and ask the question, "What does this have to do with me today?" Hopefully at the end of each message, and especially at the end of the series, we'll see how Jesus' teachings through parables are still as impactful and relevant as they were when He told them to His first followers.

First, where in the world did the title "Earthly Stories, Heavenly Meanings" come from? That's actually a pretty good definition of a parable. It's a story that people can relate to because it is almost tangible in its reality. It's a story that people can hear or read and say, "Ah, yes, I can understand what that person in the story was feeling" or, "That story is so shocking that it has really grabbed my attention, and I'm not going to be forgetting it any time soon."

At the same time, a parable is also a story that conveys a deep spiritual truth from God. It's not a morality story like the story of the

boy who cried 'wolf' too many times so eventually people wouldn't believe him when he really did see a wolf. A parable is a story that offers an insight into the heart of God or the workings of the Kingdom of God, in a way that is clear and understandable to the reader or hearer.

Today we're actually looking at two different parables that piggyback on one another. Would you turn with me to Matthew chapter 13, verses 44-46? Matthew is the first book in the New Testament, so the order goes Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Matthew is the Greek name of the person who wrote this book, the Hebrew name is Levi. A few quick factoids about Matthew are that because he was a tax collector, he would have been hated by his fellow Jewish countrymen because he was working for Rome by collecting taxes from the Jews. More than likely, Matthew had some wealth to begin with, since the occupation of being a tax collector was sold at auction to the highest bidder. That meant that usually men of great wealth were the ones who acquired these positions. Not only this, but tax collectors received a nice 'paycheck' from the Roman government, as well as actually collecting more money from the people than was necessary to line their own pockets.

When Matthew ran headlong into the amazing grace of God in Jesus, he left his job, his security and his wealth as a tax collector, and spent the rest of his life first as a disciple, then as a wandering missionary until (according to tradition), he was killed for the faith while on a missionary journey in Ethiopia around 60 AD.

Again, we are going to Matthew chapter 13, verses 44-46: *“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.”*

So, there are two parables here: one about a man who finds a treasure when he was not necessarily looking for one, and the other parable is about a man who was purposely looking for a treasure and found one. Similar, but worlds apart.

First, we said that a parable is a story that someone would connect with in a very real and tangible way. Does it make sense that someone would find a treasure sitting in a field? Maybe to us today that sounds a little far-fetched, but it wasn't for the people of Jesus' day. In fact, though it might not have been exactly common-place, it certainly wasn't unheard of.

In those days, there were no such things as safety deposit boxes, or combination lock safes. About the safest place to put a treasure was in the ground. When the nation of Israel was overrun by invading nations, the Israelites were often taken into exile. That means the conquering people would gather the Israelites and move them to their country. Think of it as if Canada invaded Massachusetts and took us all to Toronto!

When the people knew they were being forced to leave, they would often bury whatever gold or silver or jewels they had hoping that one day they, or their children,

would come back to the 'family homestead' and dig that money up to have again. Most of the exiles and their descendents never made it back to Israel. So, it was not unheard of from time to time for someone to find the treasure left behind by someone hundreds of years earlier.

That's what happened in this first parable. Someone who was not necessarily looking for a treasure, came across one in an unlikely place – sitting in an average field. There is nothing in the text that says there was anything special about this field. It was just an average, everyday, run-of-the-mill piece of ground.

In response, he gave up everything he had to buy the field, so he could own the treasure. That was the way things worked back then: when you bought a piece of property, whatever was on that property became legally yours. It didn't matter to the person that it was going to cost him everything he owned to purchase the property, he had to have that treasure. His desire for it consumed him.

The treasure is the Kingdom of God in the flesh – Jesus. The Bible tells us there was nothing remarkable about Jesus in His appearance. You can write Isaiah 53:2b in the margins of your Bible here – *“He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him.”* From the outside He looked ordinary, but when you got to know Him, when you spent time with Him, you came to realize the Kingdom of God was a treasure, and one you simply had to have, no matter the cost.

So how about us today? Are we today consumed by the desire to know Jesus? Are we consumed by the desire to have the Kingdom of God present in our midst today? Do we recognize the treasure that He is? We have been baptized, and through that baptism have received the gift of the Holy Spirit; have we let Him all the way in to have His way with us? Luke 11:13 says our Father in Heaven will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him. I'm not talking about things like speaking in tongues, or performing healings or anything like that. I'm talking about through the power of the faith given us by the Holy Spirit simply surrendering everything that gets in the way of us getting to Jesus. Leaving it all behind like Matthew did to chase after this God who left Heaven to chase after us.

The man in this first parable could not live with the thought of not having this treasure. Can we live with the thought of not having the treasure of Jesus? Because you know what? He can't live with the thought of not having us, and that's the next parable.

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."

In those days pearls were very rare and because of that, were very valuable. In this parable, the merchant is searching for a pearl, unlike the man in the first parable who was not looking for the treasure when he found it. The merchant is actively looking, conducting a search for pearls, and he found one that was remarkable. It was so beautiful and perfect he simply had to have it. There

was nothing he wouldn't give to get the beautiful and valuable pearl.

Many people don't understand this parable. They think we are the merchant searching for the pearl, which is the Kingdom of God in Jesus. They go on to say that when we 'find' Jesus after searching for Him, we give up everything to have Him. But that is not the correct application of this parable.

The pearl is not the Kingdom of God. The pearl is something the Kingdom seeks and finds, and then sacrifices greatly to obtain. Who is the merchant in this parable? It's God. Who is the pearl? It's you. In other words; you and I are of immense value and worth to God.

You can write 1 John 3:1 in the margins of your Bible next to these verses: *"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"*

What was the price God gave to get this precious pearl? He gave Himself in the form of Jesus. It's the whole message of John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him will never perish, but will have everlasting life."*

Put your name in that verse. For God so loved... that He gave His only begotten Son, that if ... believes in Him... will never perish, but will have everlasting life.

You can write 1 Peter 1:18-19 next to these verses: *"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your*

forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”

If you still have room in the margin, you can write Romans 5:8, *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

You and I are pearls of great value to God the Father, and ones that He would let nothing stand in the way of getting.

I wonder if we fully understand what God did for us? He gave up His one and only Son. Jesus gave up the glory that was His since eternity – He gave up His throne in heaven. He humbled Himself and took on human flesh. He suffered and died on a cross at the hands of sinful men.

And He planned to do it from the very beginning. The cross wasn't a surprise for Jesus, it was known to Him from all time. Before Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt; before Noah built the Ark; before the snake tempted Adam and Eve; before creation itself, He knew. He knew He would be leaving Heaven; He knew He would be arrested, tortured and crucified. For you. For me. And He did it gladly, because we are His pearls.

One more scripture reference: Hebrews 12:2. First, let me just say that the book of Hebrews was written to Christians enduring persecution under the Roman Empire. They were being imprisoned, tortured, and put to death. The book of Hebrews was written to those Christians who found themselves suffering for the faith. I'd encourage you to read through the book of Hebrews sometime, especially on those hard days

when everything seems to be going wrong. This is what Hebrews 12:2 says: *“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

Do you know what the joy is that's being talked about there? What was the joy that lead Jesus to endure the cross? It was you and me, His pearls of great worth. It was us in Heaven with Him.

We are His pearls, the ones He loves, and the ones He gave up everything for.

We are the ones He will come back for. You see, He knew us, He claimed us as His own, He purchased us with the spilling of His blood, but He hasn't taken us Home yet. He will, make no mistake about that! One day He will come with the armies of Heaven, and take His pearls to the place He's been preparing for us.

Rest secure in that knowledge today. Rest secure in that hope during those long nights and even longer days.

Amen.