

17th Sunday A (Matt 13:44-52)

Sometimes when I counsel people, I ask them to describe their God and their relationship to God. How do you describe your relationship to God? It's really quite difficult, isn't it? We flounder trying to find the right words. How can one tell of such an intimate and spiritual experience? Some of us just avoid talking about it at all. And others of us resort to metaphors and comparisons with ordinary things in the hope that our listener can make the connections. We say that our relationship to God is like being born again, or like coming home from a long journey, or like being struck by lightning, or like falling in love, or like an intimate walk with a loved one. We can't say exactly what God is, or what being in relationship to God is, so we say what it is like. We use picture words. We speak in parables. Jesus did the same thing. What is the Kingdom of God? Jesus answers that it is like a treasure in a field, like a rare pearl, like a net with all kinds of fish.

In the first parable, a poor person finds a treasure in a field. He sells all he owns to buy that field. In the second parable, a wealthy merchant finds an exceedingly valuable rare pearl. He too sells all he owns to buy it. Whether by a lucky glance or a trained eye, these two people become richer than their wildest dreams, something like on Antiques Roadshow, or winning the lottery. But to get there, each one had to trade in everything else in their lives. The surpassing value of the treasure makes all other possessions trivial. The Kingdom can be found, but only by those willing to pay the price. It can't be had along with trivial pursuits. It must replace them.

The third parable is a difficult one. The theme of hiddenness is followed. The net full of different kinds of fish yielded the good fish hidden among the bad ones. Apparently the Kingdom of God is not obvious. It must be sought and discovered. It will require some effort. But if found, it will enrich life beyond measure. This is the stuff of legends. We love stories of people buying an old book at a flea market, only to find out that it is the lost diary of a famous man. Or a woman buying an old coat and discovering a map to a hidden treasure buried by pirates. For me, as an aficionado of flea markets, I sometimes find a wonderful old vintage fountain pen to add to my collection. If the Kingdom of Heaven is hidden like that, we are in for an interesting search. But where do we start?

Jesus doesn't offer a map with a big "X" marking the spot to dig so that we will have a hidden treasure. He doesn't offer the magic series of numbers to a winning lottery ticket. The treasure which the Kingdom of God offers is not monetary at all. It's better. But where is it hidden? How do we search for it? Is it in the Vatican, or the Holy Land, or in a place of saintly service with the lepers in Calcutta? Maybe the point of Jesus' stories is to suggest that God may have hidden the signs to the Kingdom in the oldest hiding place of all- right out in the open! Maybe God has hidden the signs of the Kingdom in the smiles of children, in the outstretched hand of the poor or homeless, in the routine decisions of the workday, in the rush hour traffic of the afternoon, in the kind and loving actions of husband and wife in love. Maybe Jesus knew that if we couldn't find the presence of God in the ho-hum every day, we couldn't recognize him in the extraordinary moments of life either. So if I'm searching for the hidden Kingdom of God, I would start with my own family, my own backyard, my own job, my own children. It would be just like God to be there. And God is the only treasure really worth having. And so we give thanks that Jesus has come to remind us of the treasure we hold in him.

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