

The Treasures of Heaven
Matthew 13:44-52

I want you, for a moment, to picture a painting. In this painting is a man, exhausted and sweaty, bending over, twisting and grunting as he pulls up something of value that had been planted in the ground. He's surrounded by more, a bountiful crop just waiting to be harvested by this worker. His face is shaded but you can get just a glimpse of his expression. He's determined to reap all that has been sown in this field. His appearance otherwise seems to indicate that he is working class. He doesn't have much. Everything he has is invested in what he slowly drags up from the dirt. This image is at the forefront of our painting. It is the focus of our attention. Can you see it? You may not understand the value of this crop but this man does. His entire livelihood is wrapped up in the yield this field will produce. What happens next will determine if his work was worth it. What comes up from the soil makes all his sacrifice worthwhile.

Hold that image in your mind as we dive into the parable of Jesus today that is one verse long. "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." Our reading goes further but I am stuck thinking about the incredible weight that hangs on just one verse, two sentences out of the mouth of Jesus. Hearing these words while holding that image in your mind probably fills out the scene for you. It might alter it a little bit for you. Maybe it turns it from an agricultural scene to just a treasure hunter finding what he's been looking for. Maybe you think of one of those guys on the beach with a metal detector, finally finding that stash of coins or an expensive and forgotten watch left behind. The scene, to me, remains the same. It is a man who finds value in what is planted in the ground. In order to lay claim on that one thing he has to buy the whole field. In order to buy the whole field he has to make a great sacrifice. He sells everything to acquire this one thing. Jesus says that this is the kingdom of heaven.

Interpretations on this parable vary from preacher to preacher and denomination to denomination. I talked to my dad this week. He's preaching on the same thing and he's going to talk about prioritizing the right things in the right order. If we desire the kingdom then we must shed the other things that get in the way. If we truly value the kingdom then we must show it by removing the obstacles that keep us from obtaining it. My dad's a smart guy, a great preacher, but I see this differently. He's not wrong by any means just coming at it differently, like one would when interpreting a piece of art. Others see this scene and say that in order to truly grasp the kingdom you must sell all you have. A faithful Christian life is one that casts aside all things for the sake of the kingdom. They aren't just distractions, they are idols. This isn't just a movement of growth, this is the way you become a Christian. They say that if you don't live this way then your faith isn't real, it is just lip service. I doubt that those preachers have given up everything for the gospel. It's not realistic, even to the most fervent and faithful believers. The ones looking at this painting with that interpretation end up leading people to give up on faith altogether. I can't do that. So they hang their heads like the rich man challenged by Jesus and they give up the journey of faith.

What do you see when you picture this parable? What do you think Jesus was really getting at when he explained the kingdom of heaven using this one verse? This is obviously something very important to understand because in it is the summary of what God's kingdom is truly about. We need to decipher the words so we can understand not only heaven but what God desires to bring to our world. The kingdom of heaven is not just a description of the holy places of God but his actions and the conditions of a world when He is in charge. This parable is what it looks like when God is running the show. In our narcissism we think this parable is about us. We think it is about us giving ourselves, our entire lives to him in exchange for salvation or at least a seat or two closer to him at his eternal banquet table. In our narcissism we think that we can obtain the treasures of heaven by throwing off and away the things of this world. In our narcissism we center this picture, this parable on ourselves. We are the tireless worker who has given it all. The treasure is waiting there because of the work we've done,

because of the sacrifices we have made. That isn't it at all. Get your eyes off yourself and think about the true treasures of heaven.

I know we've been only doing one reading instead of the traditionally assigned three for each Sunday during this season of COVID-19 so we often miss the accompanying texts from the Old or New Testament. The Old Testament reading assigned for today helps us understand who is who in this parable spoken by our savior, Jesus Christ. In Deuteronomy 7 Moses reminds the Israelites, "You are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth." It's very obvious from this reading in Deuteronomy, Moses reminding the people and reminding us that we are the treasured possession. We realize, as we hear the words of Moses and as we see this scene that has been painted before us that we are not the seeker. We are not the one looking for buried treasure. We are the hidden treasure. We are the object of his desire. We are the one He relentlessly pursues at great cost to himself. So we don't have to look at all the work that we do and the exhaustion we experience and say "it's worth it because I will find the kingdom of God." No, it is that I am resting here waiting to be found. I am the treasure thing that God gives everything for. I am the thing that Jesus seeks out as his highest priority, the reason for his incarnation.

So when you see that scene, you picture all that is there you realize the captivating reality of the Gospel. It is Jesus who sacrifices all that he has to come down and get me, save me. I am his treasured possession. Jesus shed the riches of heaven. He came down off of his heavenly throne to slum it with sinners like you and me in His creation. He took on human flesh. He took on skin and bones. He denied the fullness of his divinity so that he could be one of us. He gave up all the riches of heaven to chase after you and me, his treasured possession. That's what the kingdom of heaven is. The kingdom of heaven, what it looks like when God is in charge, is that God denies all riches that he could have so that he could chase after you and me. He doesn't demand that we find him in some cosmic game of hide and seek. He doesn't demand that we sacrifice all for him. No, he comes down to us. Finds us. Digs us up out of our sin and our mess and pulls us to safety to himself.

Can you picture that? Jesus, sitting in the dirt, clutching us, that treasure possession that he now has because of what he has done. Isn't that a beautiful picture? That is what the kingdom of heaven is: Jesus coming down into our mess, into the muck and mire of this sinful world. Giving up all that he has for you and me. And that isn't just the glories of heaven. It is his very body, his very life. You want to talk about sacrifice. He hangs on the cross to die in our place so that we can be saved forever. That is what he does for his treasured possessions. That is what he does for that buried treasure in the otherwise unattractive field. Does the picture look clearer now? Do you see who is who? Do you recognize what is happening? Do you realize all that is being accomplished in these two sentences, this one powerful verse, this incredible parable? We are so much better than the sweaty laborer trying to buy our way into God's good graces. We aren't the ones digging for answers. We are the one that is recklessly pursued by Almighty God, the Creator of the cosmos, at great cost to himself. The cost was the life of his only son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

I want to show you now the painting I described at the beginning of this sermon. It is a painting by Edward Rojas called *The Parable of the Buried Treasure*. If you can't read the script below it repeats the words from Matthew: "For joy he went and sold all that he had and bought that field." I could stare at this image forever. For joy, Christ went and sacrificed everything to redeem, to buy back his treasured possessions. We aren't the tired and bent man, pulling his investment from the ground. We are the end of Christ's joyful pursuit. In joy he does all of this and in this painting we learn the true and lasting reality of this parable. In joy, Jesus doesn't just pull us out of our sin and hold us tightly. In joy, Christ pulls us up from the grave and gives us an eternal home. Right there, that picture is what the kingdom of heaven is all about. When God does his thing, his treasured possessions are exhumed from the ground, crypts cast open, and given new and everlasting life. Can you picture it?

The labors of Christ not in vain as he pulls us up out of the grave, conquering death for us by his death. That, right there, is the kingdom of heaven at work. That, right there, is you and me and all the saints waiting for Christ's return when, in joy, he will raise us up to life eternal. By the work of his hands we are sown in death but raised to eternal life. We are the treasure of heaven and God does not intend on leaving that treasure buried and hidden. Don't forget that as you look in the mirror each day, feeling defeated or worthless. Don't forget that as you pass by a cemetery or visit the grave of a loved one. In great joy Christ finds us. In great joy he pays it all for us. In great joy he pulls us up out of the depths of sin and death, offering us forgiveness, light and life for all eternity. This is the kingdom of heaven. This is what happens when God is in charge. Can you picture it?