

Kingdom Joy

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Kristy Manion

Matthew 13:44-46

A fabulous treasure hidden in a field. A merchant willing to sell off his entire collection to own one priceless pearl. Jesus' sayings of the Kingdom this morning thrill the adventure seekers in us. Interesting as our lives may be, who wouldn't willingly trade places with the treasure-finder or the pearl merchant for these once-in-a-lifetime finds?

Jesus doesn't identify the man's profession in the first parable, but it's clear he is not the landowner. Let's use our sanctified imaginations and think of him as a farm hand.

His day starts just like any other. Awake with the rooster and the songbirds. Coffee, oatmeal and the headlines by 6:30. Jug of water, a sack of lunch, off to work before the sun gets too high. Harness the mule in the lean-to and out to plow the field.

Sometime before noon, the point of the plow catches and the mule stops short. Clunk. The man mops his face and tries again. Clang. Not another big rock, he thinks. He leads the mule to shade and goes to work by hand.

Hard packed dirt is no friend of his shovel. A little trowel won't do the job. The farmhand throws all his weight onto the shoulder of a larger spade. Success! A corner of something lifts out of the ground. But oh—what's this? A metal box? Is it—a time capsule or toy chest? Or something else?

The man frees the box from its resting place. He pries open the rusty lid, gasps and whistles low, eyes like dinner plates. What a find!

Adrenaline pumping, he touches the contents of the box. He scoops up a handful of coins, feels the weight of them in his hand. Looking around but seeing no one, he snaps the box shut and reburies it. Noting the exact spot of his find, the farm hand races home. To him the next step is obvious—he must sell off his assets and buy that field. He must have that treasure!

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. A treasure hidden, but stumbled upon. A treasure hidden, but recognized for what it's worth. A treasure that someone, anyone, eagerly and joyfully does whatever it takes to possess.

Right on the heels of the parable of the hidden treasure comes the parable of the merchant.

“Again,” Jesus says, “the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls.”

Is the merchant new to the business? Or has he spent a lifetime in pearl dealing? We don't know.

But we can imagine him getting up every day to open up shop, setting out a respectable collection. If you're in the market for a valuable gem, he's the guy to call. And he's a good appraiser, too. Once on a trip he found a pearl of such size and brilliance that the sum total of the rest of his collection paled in comparison. Overjoyed by the beauty of the one, he parted with the whole collection and everything else he owned besides.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value he sold everything he had and bought it.”

The same Jesus who told these parables also said things like this:

²⁵ “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. (Matthew 11:25)

²⁵ Whoever wants to save their life^[a] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. (Matthew 16:25).

The kingdom of heaven is hidden. The kingdom of God must be sought.

Does these sayings of Jesus bother anyone besides me?

Maybe you've been praying for a friend or a family member to receive Jesus. You've walked together and your friend has seen the way you live. You're not perfect, but you are faithful. Your conversations have deepened your own faith as you've wrestled together through what this faith means. And one day your friend says, “You know, I want to believe. But I just can't. I don't see it.”

The kingdom of heaven is hidden.

Or maybe you've invested in an under-resourced community through your presence and your giving. It's a learning and growing effort for you—you're shaped just as much by this work as the people you're there to serve. And sometimes it seems like you're just making deposit after deposit. You don't see much gain. Is God working through you here?

The kingdom of heaven is hidden.

Just how unusual is a hidden treasure in a field? Is it simply hidden, or truly impossible to find? Is it more like finding \$20 in the pocket of thrift-store pants, or like finding a Rembrandt in your great-uncle's attic?

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus gives us some insights. He describes the situation in Jerusalem after the Romans put down the First Jewish Revolt in 70 AD. He writes this:

“Of the vast wealth of the city no small portion was still being discovered among the ruins. Much of this the Romans dug up, but the greater part they became possessed of through the information of the prisoners, gold and silver and other most precious articles, which the owners in view of the uncertain fortunes of war had stored underground.”

From Old Testament times people had buried their treasures in the ground. No safety deposit boxes or vaults—just jars and boxes of valuables buried in the sand, some only to be found long after the original owners had died.

And so, Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. A treasure hidden, but not impossible to find. A treasure hidden all around. A treasure hidden everywhere.

The kingdom of heaven is hidden; and the kingdom of heaven is everywhere. It is stumbled upon by those not looking for it; and it is found by those practiced in searching. Nothing prequalifies you to find it.

But when you glimpse the kingdom of heaven—ah! inexpressible joy.

CS Lewis came to faith in Christ in adulthood—kicking and screaming, you might say. He writes that an atheist can't be too careful about the kinds of books she reads—because the signposts to God are hidden everywhere.

In his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis writes about the spontaneous stabs of joy that led him in spite of himself ultimately to find God.

As I stood beside a flowering currant bush on a summer day joy suddenly arose in me without warning. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but desire for what? Before I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred by a longing for the longing that had just ceased. In a sense the central story of my life is about nothing else. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world.”

Kingdom joy. It's like trembling joy that wells up in a couple ready to meet their first child. It's the hold-your-breath wonder at God's good creation of life. It's joy that makes us disregard labor pains, parenting at 3 a.m., and the eventual cost of a college education. That exuberant expectation of loving a treasured child is more than worth whatever costs may accompany it.

Kingdom joy: It's like unforeseen delight in recognizing a kindred spirit in a friend. It's an echo of thanks for the good gift of laughter --carbonated holiness. It's the realization that each of you are richer, more deliberate followers of Jesus because of your friendship. Joy will keep you making time and space for this friend, even if other priorities have to be discarded. The sheer joy of that friendship is worth whatever else you might give up to invest in it.

Joy motivates the farm hand to sell everything. Joy motivates the merchant to trade all he has for the one rare pearl. No one tells them to sacrifice a thing—the treasure and the thrill of the find do all the heavy lifting. The treasure of the kingdom draws a joyful response out of us that spills over in sacrifice.

Matthew records five other instances of “joy” in his gospel:

One is in the parable of the sower referring the person who “hears the word and receives it with joy;”

Two are in the parable of the talents--relating to the joy of the master in response to those who have invested their talents well;

And two more capture the joy of finding something—whether that something was sought, or stumbled upon.

Matthew 2:10, referring to the Magi after their visit to King Herod:

When the Magi saw the star, they were **overjoyed**.¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they **bowed down and worshiped him**.

And Matthew 28:5, when the women go to Jesus' tomb and hear the angel's words:

“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.
⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay....

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with **joy**, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and **worshiped him**.”

Jesus, our priceless treasure, died and was hidden in a grave. But he didn't stay hidden, and neither will his kingdom. He arose, and his kingdom has come, and is coming.

And when we seek Jesus, when we find Jesus, our response is joy as we worship Jesus.

Jesus opens to us the treasure of the kingdom through his preaching. He opens the treasure of the kingdom through his presence and his power. And he opens the treasure of his kingdom through the forgiveness offered through his cross.

Because of Jesus, we have become citizens of a kingdom that comes through hidden and surprising places.

“The kingdom,” Scott Hoezee writes, “is present *any place and every place where the influence of Jesus' living presence determines the shape of life*. Wherever and whenever Jesus' wisdom, Jesus' wit, Jesus savvy, Jesus' words, and Jesus' love mold the words, actions, thoughts, and life patterns of some person or group of persons, then *there* is where God's kingdom is manifest.”

Look—there it is! Do you see it?

There is the kingdom, in the face of the inmate who comes to know his slate wiped clean in Christ. There is the kingdom, in the family who says, “We miss mom terribly—but she and we knew the love of Jesus right up to the end. We stood on holy ground together.” There is the kingdom, in the way Christian brothers and sisters all over the world, even under surveillance or in hiding, worship Christ

today. There is the kingdom—the way the Spirit of Jesus leads and guides individuals and communities in unexpected ways to honor God.

Look—it is coming! There is the kingdom-to-come, a kingdom that cannot be shaken, a kingdom in which every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

The Apostle Paul quotes Isaiah:

“What no eye has seen,
what no ear has heard,
and what no human mind has conceived”
the things God has prepared for those who love him— (1 Corinthians 2:9).

THERE is God’s kingdom. Do you see it? Oh, I know right now it’s hidden. Might be a little dusty. But don’t let that bother you. Keep right on looking—what we find now is only a reflection of what someday will be.

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