

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, July 30, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
“Pearl of terrific value”

Six parables in 12 verses. You have to look long and hard to find a more rapid-fire, condensed collection of parables anywhere in Scripture. They are short and pithy, all of them featuring very ordinary things, living and inanimate – a mustard seed, yeast, dough, a field, buried treasure, a valuable pearl, a varied catch after at the end of a fishing trip. And they all offer some insight into what the kingdom of heaven is like.

I always enjoy watching the Antiques Roadshow – who doesn't? Not that I own any antiques: the closest I have to an antique is my file of 40-year-old sermons. And that is never going to get the Roadshow experts excited.

But I love watching people's reactions to the experts' verdict. Everyone tries so hard to be cool, to appear to be not really interested in the dollar value of their item. But it's never hard to spot who was hoping to be told they had something incredibly valuable and has just found out that it is a piece of junk. And it's never hard to tell who is going to head right out to find an auction room to sell what they thought was junk but is actually incredibly valuable.

But the reaction I liked most of all came from one lady who was given a valuation that was clearly much higher than she was expecting for whatever it was that she brought in. I don't remember what she brought in, but I do remember that when she was first given the valuation, she smiled nervously. Then she started to giggle. And the giggle grew into a laugh. In the end she was guffawing so hard that she was almost helpless, and quite unable to speak. It was so genuine, so natural, so human.

And I always enjoy hearing the stories behind people's treasures. I think my favourite was the man who had been searching a field in England with his metal detector. He hadn't found anything, and was packing up to go home when his detector suddenly buzzed. He searched about and found a gold ring. It turned out to be, if not a wedding ring, then at least a token of someone's love. It was something like 700 years old, made of solid gold, and the work of a skilled craftsman. It's a lovely story made up of equal parts of history, romance and serendipity.

That's exactly the kind of thing that Jesus was talking about in the parable of the treasure in the field. The difference is that the man with the metal detector did the right thing, the legal thing. As the law requires, he reported his find to the appropriate authority that deals with antiquities in the United Kingdom. And as the law also requires, he agreed to share the value of the ring with the owner of the land where he found it.

By contrast, the person who found the treasure in the field in Jesus' parable acted a bit less honourably. He kept quiet about his find, while he went and liquidated all his assets and holdings. And when he had raised the capital, he bought the field, and thus was able to lay legal claim to the treasure that it contained. I always find it fascinating that Jesus should have made

his point by telling a parable about a course of action that may have been legal, but was also ethically ambiguous, if not downright shady.

At least the merchant who found the pearl acted honourably: *he went and sold all that he had and bought it* Matthew 13:45. And whoever threw the net into the sea and caught fish of every kind, and the woman who leavened the flour, got what they got through honest toil, pure and simple.

But unlike so many of Jesus' other parables, these parables are not about the people who feature in them. They are partly about the objects that feature in them – the mustard plant, the flour, the treasure, the pearl, the net. And the objects that feature in the parables are in turn all about the kingdom of God.

But the parables are also about what people were prepared to do to lay their hands on what they hoped to have. Someone had to plant the mustard seed before it could grow into the greatest of shrubs and become a tree. The woman had to work the yeast into the flour to leaven it. The treasure hunter and the pearl dealer each had to go and sell all that they had in order to buy the object of their desires. Someone had to throw the net into the sea before it could catch fish of every kind. In each case, there was a cost that had to be paid, either in hard cash or in time and effort, before the treasure could be won.

In each case, there was a cost that had to be paid, either in hard cash or in time and effort, or at the very least, in keeping eyes and minds open, before the treasure could be won.

But maybe the most interesting and important point about these parables is that they speak of discovering the kingdom of God in such ordinary terms. There is none of the big, dramatic imagery that we see elsewhere in Scripture: the drama of Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3; the mystical otherworldliness of Isaiah's vision of the Lord high and lifted up and his train filling the Temple in Isaiah 6; Isaiah's agonised, impassioned prayers in Isaiah 64, as he pleads with God to tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at God's presence; or most vividly of all, St John's description of a new heaven and a new earth in the book of Revelation, especially in chapter 21 where he talks about the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Powerful, vivid, dynamic images, all of them. And all of them with something to say about the kingdom of God as it will be. But Jesus brings it all down to a very everyday, human level. He talks about seed, and yeast, and dough, and undiscovered treasure, and how the results of human labour can be pointers to God's kingdom.

In his poem, *To See a World...* William Blake wrote about seeing a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower, about holding infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour. What if it really is as simple as that? What if the kingdom of God is not just still to come, but is already here, right here, right now?

Homework: how many times did Jesus say that the kingdom of God is among you, or that the kingdom of God has come near? And if the kingdom is among us, what signs have you seen that it is? And what signs might we be missing?