

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 9
July 30, 2023
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
What is the kingdom of heaven worth to you?

[Jesus said] “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid again. In his joy, he goes away and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one very valuable pearl, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁴⁷ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. ⁴⁸ When the net was filled, they pulled it onto the shore. They sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but threw the bad ones away. ⁴⁹ That is how it will be at the end of the world. The angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous who are among them. ⁵⁰ And they will throw the wicked into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ⁵¹ Jesus said to them, “Did you understand all these things?”

They answered him, “Yes.”

⁵² He said to them, “Therefore every expert in the law who has been trained as a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his treasure both new things and old things.”

—Matthew 13:44-52

Have you ever had someone promise you a great treasure, and you were lured into risking something to get that treasure? A while back I received a phone call from Publishers Clearing House (at least that’s what they claimed). The guy on the phone was so excited that I had won \$5 million or \$5,000 per week for the rest of my life. He couldn’t wait to present me with that check. After explaining the process and how I was going to receive the treasure, the only thing I needed to do was wire \$1,000 from my bank account to a different account to verify that it was really me. They even called someone from the IRS, supposedly, to prove that this was a legitimate transaction. Well, I’m happy to tell you that I didn’t fall for this scam. But I also want to tell you that I was tempted to.

What if it was real? What if I just won \$5 million? I was envisioning all the things I could do with that money, including paying for our Ministry and Education Center. What if that treasure was real?

When we have a promise of treasure, a promise of fixing all our needs, a promise of giving us what we want, we are ready to risk almost anything and everything to get it. Right? I mean that’s why so many people fall into problems with gambling or buying lottery tickets or falling victim to various scams. When there is a promise of treasure, we are ready to risk anything to get it. All we think about is that treasure.

So, one day Jesus told his disciples that is what the kingdom of heaven is like. Not the scam, but the treasure. In Matthew 13, Jesus tells a series of seven parables, stories to teach something about the kingdom of heaven. We see three of them today. Jesus told a story about a man who found a treasure in a field. It wasn’t his field, so he went and sold everything he had in order to buy that field just so that he could have the treasure that was buried in the field. And Jesus told the story about a merchant who went searching for pearls. He found one that was so beautiful and so precious, that he was willing to sell every treasure he had just to get that one pearl. And then Jesus tells the story about what happens in the church. The church is mixed with good fish and bad. But just as we heard last week, it isn’t until the end of the world that all that will be sorted. Jesus will send the angels and they will separate the believers from the unbelievers, true believers from hypocrites. And at the end of all these stories, Jesus asks his disciples, **“Did you understand all these things?” They answered him, “Yes.”**

And of course, they did. We all do, right? Jesus and the message of salvation is the greatest treasure we have. When you have Jesus, you have a God in heaven who is watching over you and making sure everything will work out for your good. When you have Jesus, all the problems and struggles that you face will eventually work out for your eternal good. When you have Jesus, you have the promise that every single one of your sins are forgiven. When you have Jesus, you never have to spend another

moment of your life wrestling with guilt. When you have Jesus, you have the promise that when you close your eyes in death, you will open them to a paradise where everything will be beautiful and perfect. When you have Jesus, you long for heaven where there will be no more tears, no more pain, no more struggles, no more sin. When you have Jesus, you have no fear of the Last Day when the angels will come and sort through the wicked and righteous who are part of the visible church. When you have Jesus, you know how you stand before God. And when you have Jesus and share him, you have the promise that you can give that gift to the people you love. You have the one thing that can absolutely heal you for eternity. You have the one thing that can spare you from pain and death and hell for eternity. That is a tremendous treasure that is promised to you. **So, what is the kingdom of heaven worth to you?**

Would you be willing to give up anything and everything to gain and keep that treasure? Would you be willing to be like the man walking through the field or the merchant searching for pearls? Would you be willing to give up everything just to have that treasure?

That's the way a lot of people read these parables of the treasure. They think that we are the men who are in Jesus' parables. Now, certainly, Jesus encourages us to seek first his kingdom and righteousness and all these things will be given you. Jesus' kingdom is to be our greatest treasure. Certainly, the Apostle Paul says that he considers everything garbage compared to knowing Christ. Christ is our greatest treasure. So, there is an aspect that these parables are sanctification parables for us. This is how we live as Christians who treasure Jesus and his gospel. But I'm not so sure that is the *main* emphasis of the parables of the treasures that Jesus places before us.

You see, if the focus was on people who always keep God first and are willing to sell everything to get that treasure, I'm not so sure I'm in that group. And I'm not so sure you would be either. It's the nature of our hearts to lose focus. It's the reason why the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy to keep reminding people to put their hope in God, not in wealth. Our hearts gravitate toward those things. You see, we often treasure the wrong things. Or maybe I could put it a different way. If you weren't sitting in church right now and if I as a pastor wasn't asking you this, how would you finish this sentence. "I could know that everything was going to be okay if only I had...." If only I had \$5 million... If only I had a job... If only I had peace in my home... If only I had a cure for the sickness with which my wife is struggling... .

And if the people of God are people who always know that the only treasure they need is Christ and that they are always willing to give up everything in their lives to have him, I'm not so sure that's me. I struggle with this, and perhaps you do as well.

So, maybe we should take a closer look at these parables because there is a treasure here that Jesus doesn't want us to miss. In Matthew 13 Jesus gives seven different parables to help us know something about the kingdom of heaven. And when Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, he isn't talking so much of *heaven*. He's talking about what happens when Jesus puts his gospel to work here on earth. The kingdom of heaven is his activity among us. It's his ruling activity among us. The kingdom of heaven is the invisible kingdom that grows as people come to faith in Jesus' work as Savior. So, the kingdom of heaven is what happens when Jesus builds his reign in our hearts through his gospel.

Just look at the sequence of stories that Jesus tells in Matthew 13. In the parable of the sower, who is primarily at work sowing seed? God is. He sows the seed of his Word. Oh, he uses us, but he is the one who sows the seed. Or the parable of the weeds among the wheat? Who plants the wheat? Who is going to harvest at the end? It's God. We didn't talk about them, but Jesus shares two other parables, the mustard seed and the yeast in the flour. In all of those stories, the spiritual meaning is that God is at work with his gospel. This is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

So, in the parables of the treasures, who do you think is the man who is willing to give up everything so that he can get the treasure and the pearl? It's not you; it's not me. It's God. It's Jesus. That fits with all the other parables. You see, he goes searching, and the treasure that Jesus wants us to have eyes open to in these stories is you.

Look at this picture. The artist is Edward Riojas. I know it's hard to see, but if you look at the tombstone, you will see his name. Buried in the ground is the treasure to Jesus. You are God's treasure. You are what God is willing to give up everything to have. Jesus willingly gave up everything just so that he could have *you*. Remember that on the days when it doesn't look like it.

So often when we look at ourselves and when people see us, it's easy to see the garbage and the worthless, the sinful and the broken; the person who can't hold down a job; someone whose relationships keep falling apart; someone who no matter how much you fight against and struggle with a sin, you keep falling into it; someone who maybe has given up fighting against it.

When that's you, remember this story. God looks at you and finds a treasure. He is willing to give up anything and everything just for you.

And, also, remember that on the days when you kind of feel like a pearl. We wouldn't say it that way. We recognize that we aren't perfect, but there are times when we may think we are so much better than many people in this world. We might not be perfect, but we're working on getting better. At least, we haven't fallen into the worst of the worst sins like so many people around us. If you have ever convinced yourself of this, have you ever given thought to how disgusting that must look to God?

How disgusting for us to stand before a holy and perfect God who requires people to be holy and perfect and make the bold statements, "You know, God, at least I am not as bad as many of the people out there." How disgusting! Oh, how he would have every right to cast us aside on the pile of imperfect pearls as garbage. But what does he do? **"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls. When he found one very valuable pearl, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."**

Jesus treasures you. He treasures you. When you thought you were beautiful and good, he didn't walk away and just cast you to the side. Rather he clothed you with something even more beautiful and good than your imperfections. He clothes you with his perfect robe of righteousness. He bought you with his precious blood and made you his most valuable treasure.

You see, that is how the kingdom of heaven works. That is how the gospel of our Lord Jesus, his ruling activity in our lives, works. It's like this: **"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that although he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich"** (2 Corinthians 8:9).

This is how the kingdom of heaven works. **"This is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins"** (1 John 4:10).

This is how the kingdom of heaven works. **"But God shows his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"** (Romans 5:8).

You are God's treasure. And how much are you worth to God? He was willing to give up everything just so that he could have *you*.

My friends, what do you do with that truth? Oh, certainly we treasure it. There is nothing that is so valuable to us than that message. But we don't keep it to ourselves. No. Jesus tells us what to do with that valuable truth.

He said to his disciples, **"Therefore every expert in the law who has been trained as a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his treasure both new things and old things."**

Of course, the experts in the law in Jesus' day were the religious leaders who were sure they knew how the kingdom of heaven worked. They could spend the entire day telling you about how to be a good person and how to seek God in the right way to become a part of his kingdom. They saw themselves more as the guardians of the kingdom than anything else.

They thought that they knew what it meant to be followers of God by their works. And they missed the greatest treasure that was before them. They thought they were there to guard the kingdom and watch over the treasure of God, but they completely missed the God who treasured them.

You see, my friends, we aren't here to take the treasure of Jesus and bury it and just keep it for ourselves. We are here to give it away... to anyone who is lost, to anyone who is begging, to anyone who is guilty, to anyone who is hopeless. You and I have the great privilege of inviting people into the storehouse of God's riches. You and I have the great privilege of showing them the God who sought them out and treasured them so dearly.

This isn't some scam. This is the greatest giveaway this world will ever see. This is how the kingdom of heaven works. What is the kingdom of heaven worth to you? It's worth everything. In fact, it's worth so much to us that we must share it with others. Give people the spiritual wealth. It truly changes lives. Amen.