



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

July 30, 2017

“Rags to Riches”
(Matthew 13:44-46)
Rev. David K. Groth

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, give us an increase of faith, hope, and love, that, receiving what You have promised, we may love what You have commanded; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Earlier this year, Karl Ratsch's went out of business. Ratsch's was a fine German restaurant in Milwaukee that served schnitzel, spaetzle and beer for 113 years. But then food tastes changed, and heavy German food in Milwaukee fell out of favor. They should have moved to Watertown! Instead they closed and held an online auction of all the contents of the restaurant. I had my eyes on one of those stainless steel stock pots. I've always wanted one, but they're so expensive to buy new. I thought this would be a good opportunity to buy one cheap, and at the same time own a little piece of history. When all the world admired my stainless steel stock pot, I could casually say, "Yeah, and it comes straight from the kitchen of Karl Ratsch's!"

So I looked at all the stock pots they had, and there were little pictures online, and they had the dimensions, and I roughed it out with my hands and chose one that looked just right and submitted my bid. Then, for days, I'd check in and follow what was happening online. No one was bidding on my stock pot! But you know how those things go. The last three minutes of the online auction, the price took off. Some guy named Buddy was going after my stock pot! Well that got the competitive juices flowing, and by gum I wasn't going to let some Buddy elbow me out! And I didn't. I got the thing. Paid too much for it, but got the thing and was thrilled . . . until I went in to pick up my new treasure. On first seeing it I thought there must be some mistake. [Bring it out.] What on earth am I going to do with this? It doesn't even fit in that space between the stove top and the microwave. And can you imagine how heavy it would be filled with soup? I asked if I could return it. No, I now own the mother of all stock pots.

Anything like that ever happen to you? Ever get

fixated on something, and start thinking about it a little too much, and pretty soon in your mind it becomes a treasure, something you simply must have, something that will make your life better, or make you better? You spend more than you should, and initially, you're so glad to have it. But sooner or later, the value of your little treasure fades. It doesn't impress you or anyone else, but just takes up space. Anything like that ever happen with you?

That's pretty much the fate of all your earthly treasures. Sooner or later, all our earthly treasures won't be worth a penny, and the only thing that will matter in all the world is Jesus. In the end, he is the only treasure worth having.

That's the point of our text this morning. In ancient times, wealth was usually accumulated in the form of silver or gold or gemstones. But there were no banks or safety-deposit boxes. Houses could only be made minimally secure. So the usual way to keep wealth was simply hide it. Bury it somewhere near the house. But sometimes individuals wouldn't tell anyone where it was and would die unexpectedly. Or they would bury their treasure before going off to war, and would never come back. Or they would in their old age forget where they buried their treasure.

That's the background for this parable of Jesus: a man is plowing a field and bumps into something hard. He uncovers a container, and within it, he discovers a treasure. Immediately, he buries it again, buying himself time, time to gather the resources to purchase the field. That's the first parable. Jesus tells it in two sentences.

The second parable he tells with only one sentence, and yet how memorable it is! "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it."

Pearls were held in more esteem 2,000 years ago than they are today. They were a conspicuous way of displaying wealth. There were no convincing counterfeits, nor any cultured pearls. If you saw a pearl earring or a necklace of

pearls, it was the real deal, and a big deal. This merchant knows pearls and judges them on the scales of size, shape, luster, color and surface blemishes. But then he happens upon a pearl that knocks his socks off. It is perfection; he simply must have it. So he sells everything he has, liquefies all of it, his properties, his inventory of lesser pearls, he unloads it all so that he can acquire this one great pearl.

Now, a question: Don't both these parables say the same thing? In both cases a guy stumbles on a treasure and does whatever it takes to claim it for himself. But there is at least one critical difference worth mentioning. In the first parable, it's a poor man who comes across the treasure. In the second parable, it's a rich man.

Let's consider the first guy. He doesn't own the field. That makes him a servant, a hired hand, just a notch or two above a slave. He's not rich. If he were, he wouldn't be working in someone else's field. Moreover, Jesus simply calls him "a man", anthropos, and there are billions of them. This one is not distinguished in any way. He's just an average bloke who has stumbled upon a priceless treasure.

You see what Jesus is doing here? By making this guy anonymous and non-descript, he could be any one of us, and we could be him. Any one of us can come into possession of this great treasure, no matter who we are, how average we are, or what we've done. And the treasure is nothing less than the kingdom of heaven. Some guy is minding his own business when his life intersects with great treasure. Isn't that how it happened for each of us?

Most of you were carried to the font. What did you do to earn God's favor? What did you give to God that he should give you the kingdom of heaven? We come poor and empty handed before the Lord, but how gracious and generous God has been to us!

Paul wrote, "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? . . . And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 6:9ff).

A man working in a field . . . an anthropos. It makes me think of the word, “whoever” – as in, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Whoever . . . what a wonderful word for people like us! No one is left out of that word. And no one is left out of the word “all”, as in “All who believe and are baptized shall be saved” (Mk. 16:16), or “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:23). Who knew that so small a word could be so great!

Now, the guy in the second parable is not average. He’s not a servant or a hired hand, and he’s not poor. He’s “a merchant in search of fine pearls.” There aren’t too many of those in the world. Of course, he’s rich and his clientele are rich and so are most of his friends. But then he comes across this pearl, and it is so beautiful that it makes him feel poor. By comparison, his own treasures seem cheap and hollow, like plastic trinkets.

Again, isn’t that like the kingdom of heaven? What treasures do we have that can compare? Even if we’re rich by earthly standards (and most of us are) yet compared to this treasure, we’re poor. So nothing is more important than securing this one thing. It’s about priorities.

It makes me think of that time Jesus visited the home of Martha and Mary, and what Jesus said: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.” “One thing is necessary.”

It also makes me think of that rich young man who thought he wanted to follow Jesus. But Jesus would first have to dismantle the man’s idol, so he says to him, “First, sell everything you have, give the cash to the poor. Then follow me” (Mt. 19:21). The man just couldn’t see himself doing that. He had a lot, and he could not see himself letting it go. That which we are not willing to give up or let go of is our god.

Notice neither one of these guys (the field hand and the pearl merchant), neither one of these guys is casual or

indifferent about the treasure. Neither one of them is going to let it slip away. Neither one of them is going to allow anything distract them from the treasure they seek. Both know once you have the great treasure, you have everything. Even if you're dirt poor, with Jesus, you are absolutely rich. And even if you're filthy rich, without Jesus, you're destitute. So there's no room for a casual indifference here. There's no possibility for a take it or leave it attitude toward this treasure. A lack of interest from a man might just be rewarded on the Last Day with a lack of interest from that man's Savior.

On the other hand, when we secure this treasure by faith, it changes our lives. Each of us becomes a rags to riches story, whoever we are. For we could never buy or earn this treasure. Remember what Isaiah wrote, "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Is. 64:6). So let go of the idea that God is somehow rewarding you.

Luther spoke rather bluntly about it: "Either go to hell or consider your own human righteousness to be mere dirt" (Plass, p. 1233). He also wrote, "A cow must have hay and straw. This is a rule without which she cannot exist. But through this law she does not become a child, a daughter, or an heiress in the house; she remains a cow. So here too. Although I have all the laws and commandments, I thereby am not, and do not become God's dear child [by obeying them]. Far less am I or do I become God's child by becoming a monk, even if monks were a hundred thousand times holier than they are . . . If a cow said: I am daughter and heiress in the house, and if that could should then lay down in the cradle in which the daughter should lie, we would say: Outside with such a daughter! Bring the butcher to teach this daughter manners" (p. 1222).

That is, no one can storm the gates of heaven and demand entrance based on who we are and what we've done. We can only point to Jesus, who he is as Savior and what he's done for us on the cross. He is our priceless treasure.

We call a lot of things priceless. It's one of those overused words, right? But the grace of our Lord Jesus

Christ is truly priceless. Again from Isaiah, “I delight greatly in the LORD . . . For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness” (Is. 61:10).

He’s the treasure. All other treasures start looking like an over-sized, mostly useless stock pot for which some guy paid too much. Paul wrote, “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8).

He’s the treasure. He will always be the treasure. Nothing else compares. It’s still all about Jesus! Amen.

