

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

July 30, 2023 – PENTECOST 9 / PROPER 12A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Seeking Christ—Our Greatest Treasure*”

Old Testament	1 Kings 3:5-12	(King Solomon asks God for wisdom, not riches)
Psalter	Psalms 119:129-136	(Praise for God's law and a plea for grace to keep it)
Epistle	Romans 8:26-39	(The Holy Spirit intercedes for, and within, us)
Gospel	St. Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52	(Jesus offers parables about the Kingdom of God)

Before Chinese menus existed, Jesus seems to be giving us one in today's Gospel reading. Do we pick one from parable one, add some from parable four, and take a small serving of parable six? Why don't we start with the third one. Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid.” Children often fantasize that in an abandoned field or old building or barn they will unearth a treasure that has escaped everyone's attention. In our modern society, we pooh-pooh such notions; things like that don't happen anymore. Yet from time-to-time amazing discoveries *are* made.¹

In 1947, a nomadic shepherd living near Qumran in Palestine unearthed in a cave the first five Dead Sea Scrolls, two-thousand-year-old authentic biblical texts.² In 2015, diver William Bartlett had just started to explore a 300-year-old shipwreck with a metal detector in the waters off Florida's Atlantic Coast when he found his first Spanish gold coin. One coin became two, and two became so many he had to stuff them into his diving glove. Over the next couple of days, Bartlett and another treasure hunter, Dan Beckingham, found 350 coins worth \$4.5 million, the most valuable find from a 1715 shipwreck site in this century.³

In Jesus' parable a treasure has been hidden in a field. Who put it there and how long ago are questions that cannot be answered. What we do know is that ancient Palestine was a country frequently ravaged by war. People often hid their treasure in a field rather than in the house, where thieves would be able to find it. Buried in a field, the treasure would be much safer. But if the owner were killed during a war, he would carry his secret with him to the grave. Thus no one would ever know where he had hidden the treasure.

In Matthew 25 (vv. 14 ff.), Jesus told a story about a master who gave some talents (a measure of money) to his servants: “To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability.” But the third servant was worried about losing the money. So, to keep it safe, he buried in the ground. Over the years, Palestine must have become a veritable treasure stash!

The man in Jesus' parable who found such a treasure may have been a hired hand or renter. He may have been plowing the field, digging a ditch, or planting a tree. Whatever the case, he hit something hard that didn't sound like a rock. He dug it out and found a treasure. We're not told what the treasure was, just that the man was filled with joy upon finding it. Since in those days it was not uncommon for a person who was plowing or digging in a field to accidentally come across a treasure, Jesus' story seems plausible. But some have expressed concern that the man in the parable is dishonest—that he should have contacted the owner of the field whose property it rightfully was.⁴

Well, not necessarily. Jewish rabbinic law stated: “If a man finds scattered fruit or money, it belongs to the finder.”⁵ That's a legal way of saying, “Finders, keepers.” Therefore, those listening to Jesus' story would not have perceived the man's actions as unethical. If he were dishonest, the man would have simply dug up the treasure and gone on his way. He would not have bothered to give up everything in order to buy the field.

And this is the point of Jesus' parable: A man discovered something so valuable that he sold everything he had in order to possess it. Once we understand and believe what Jesus Christ has done for us (His atoning death) and is willing to offer us (forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life), we, too, are desperate to have this treasure, and don't want to let go of it.

Pressing on, Jesus next gives us the parable of the Pearl of Great Price: “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Coming right after, this story seems to be a close parallel to that of the man who found a buried treasure. The same dedication is found in both parables. Each person must have the object of his desire even if it costs him his livelihood. Both literally sell all that they have in order to obtain the treasure or the pearl.

During Old Testament times pearls were unknown, but by the first century they had become a status symbol of the wealthy. For instance, in Matthew 7:6, Jesus tells His audience, “Do not throw your pearls before swine,” meaning, don’t bare your soul of what is valuable to you if the other person doesn’t care. Also, St. Paul wanted the women of his day to dress modestly, [quote] “not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes” (1 Timothy 2:9). Wealthy women put pearls in their hair to display their riches. When a Roman emperor wanted to show how affluent he was, he would dissolve pearls in vinegar and then drink them in his wine, in much the same way that in our time some pretentious Wall Street type might light his cigar with a hundred-dollar bill. So, in the time of Jesus and His disciples, pearls were in great demand. Merchants had to travel to the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf to find them, and the best pearls came from off the coast of Ceylon in India.

The man portrayed by Jesus is a merchant looking for fine pearls. The Greek word for merchant is “*emporos*,” from which we get the English word “emporium.” He would buy things wholesale and sell them to a retailer. We have no idea how far he had traveled, but on this given day, he finds one pearl of superlative value. A chance of a lifetime! He will not be satisfied until that pearl is his. He mulls it over, makes his calculations, evaluates his assets, and decides to sell all his belongings in order to buy that one perfect pearl.

We should note that he discovered this treasure in the course of his normal business dealings. And the pearl is an especially appropriate figure for God’s Kingdom because it is the only jewel that cannot be improved by man. All others must be cut and polished by skilled craftsmen before they have retail value as gemstones. But a pearl is perfect when it is made in nature and it cannot be improved by cutting or polishing. In fact, a pearl made by humans is worthless. Again, a good image for the Kingdom of God, because the Lord has designed it to be perfect from the beginning of time throughout eternity. And we can’t make it happen. We can’t improve on it. We can’t buy it. We simply have to seek it and find it.

What is the Kingdom of God on earth? For that, we look to Galatians 5:22-23, to find that it is characterized by “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Wherever these are practiced and lived by, the Kingdom of God is near. God’s Kingdom is also eternity, where believers can be with Him forever.

We know that we cannot buy our way into heaven—with good deeds, or indulgences, or bargaining with God. So you might be asking: “What about those two guys who sold everything they had to buy the field and the pearl?” Ah, but there’s a difference between a *purchase* and a *sacrifice*. A purchase is directed towards acquiring an object of equivalent value. Sacrifice is giving one’s all when no reward is expected. In giving all they had, these finders of great treasure—the Kingdom of God—were not buying in, they were *sacrificing* all that was theirs. They gave all they had—their selves, their sins, their selfish pride—for the one thing to be desired: Being with God forever.

Church Fathers such as St. Irenaeus and St. Augustine identified the treasure and the Pearl with Christ. In fact, new converts to Jesus tend to say, “I’ve found Christ.” It may seem as though we find Jesus, but it is Christ who offers the treasure and the pearl to seekers traveling along life’s way. The truth is, we sinners *cannot* “find Christ” without His help, for we are blinded by sin and stubborn, because we’re human. As St. Paul writes in Romans 3:10, “There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God.”

It is the Savior who seeks lost sinners, the Good Shepherd who goes after the lost sheep. The Treasure Hunter who is looking for His little gems, the ones of much value whom He has created, and whom He never wants to lose. As we read in 2 Peter (3:9c EXB) God “does not want anyone to be lost ... but he wants all people to change their hearts and lives”—that is, come to repentance.

In Jeremiah 29:13 (BSB), God says: “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” Many of us tend to put “all our heart” into lots of things—raising our grandchildren, doing our jobs, fixing up our yards or houses. But are we, even if we are already believers, seeking the Lord and His Kingdom with all our hearts, every day?

An old hymn goes “All to Jesus I surrender, all to Him I freely give; I will ever love and trust Him, in His presence daily live. I surrender all, I surrender all. All to thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all.”

May God give *us* the grace to surrender all, as we seek His Kingdom here on earth, and eagerly look forward to it in the life to come. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. Jeffrey Smead, “Sermon on Heaven,” 28 July 2011, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-parable-treasure-and-pearl-i-surrender-all-j-jeffrey-smead-sermon-on-heaven-159118), <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-parable-treasure-and-pearl-i-surrender-all-j-jeffrey-smead-sermon-on-heaven-159118>> 25 July 2023. Used with permission.

² Adolfo Roitman, “The Dead Sea Scrolls,” n.d. [Shrine of the Book](https://www.imj.org.il/en/wings/shrine-book/dead-sea-scrolls#:~:text=The%20Dead%20Sea%20Scrolls%20are,to%20the%20first%20century%20CE.), <<https://www.imj.org.il/en/wings/shrine-book/dead-sea-scrolls#:~:text=The%20Dead%20Sea%20Scrolls%20are,to%20the%20first%20century%20CE.>> 25 July 2023. Used with permission.

³ Betsy Reed, Ed. “Sunken 1715 Spanish fleet a treasure trove that keeps on giving gold,” 20 August 2015, [The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/20/sunken-1715-spanish-fleet-gold-coins), <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/20/sunken-1715-spanish-fleet-gold-coins>> 25 July 2023. Used with permission.

⁴ Simon J. Kistemaker, [The Parables of Jesus](#) (Baker Publishing Group, 1987).

⁵ *Ibid.*