

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost
July 28, 2002

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Lay Hold on the Treasure

Matthew 13:44-46

NIV Matthew 13:44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. 46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Fellow Citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven,

The California gold rush of 1849 is one of the episodes in American history that shows just how much people will endure for the chance to find treasure. When word got out that gold nuggets the size of a man's fist were turning up in California, thousands and thousands of treasure-seekers braved all kinds of adversity to try to claim a share of the wealth. The fact is that very few got rich on gold discoveries. Contrary to their fevered imaginings, chunks of gold weren't just lying on the ground waiting to be scooped up. The gold rush was really more of a bonanza for those who sold supplies, since they could charge outrageous rates for their goods. Some prospectors found a fortune in gold, but many more fell victim to thieves or sickness or broken dreams. In the back of their minds, most of the treasure hunters probably acknowledged that it could be like this, but they set out anyway, hoping for treasure.

In a way, we're all treasure seekers. We may not sell the family home and set out for a distant place where there's rumored to be gold, but we each have our own concept of what constitutes a treasure and we'll work hard to acquire it. The opening verses of today's Gospel lesson are addressed to disciples, including you and me, who already possess a treasure. This treasure is membership in the kingdom of heaven through faith in the King of heaven, Jesus Christ. This gift of God's grace has value far beyond the richest vein of gold or all the treasures of Egypt. By his use of two parables, Jesus wants us to recognize what a treasure we Christians have so that we'll continue to lay hold on it by faith.

Today, and for the two previous Sundays, our Gospel lesson comes from Matthew 13. First before the crowds and now in private with his disciples, Jesus has been unveiling the secret inner workings of his kingdom. Jesus calls his kingdom the kingdom of heaven. This is no earthly kingdom. This is the kingdom we pray for in the Lord's Prayer, the kingdom that comes to include us when God gives us his Holy Spirit so that we believe what the Bible tells us about Jesus. This is not a future kingdom, but one that exists right now, though invisibly, wherever Jesus rules in the hearts of his believers. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus explains in this chapter, is a kingdom that's established by the power of the Word. It's not a forcible kingdom. No one is compelled to belong to it. In fact, the message of the kingdom is widely rejected. Thus it's a kingdom in which the subjects of

the king live side by side with the sons of the Evil One right up until Judgment Day. And it's a kingdom that grows mysteriously and yet grows very large.

Many people who heard Jesus talk about his kingdom wanted no part of it. What he was describing was too different from what they imagined the Messiah's kingdom would be. They had envisioned an earthly kingdom, like David used to have, like the preceding kingdoms of Egypt, Babylon, and Rome. Their response to Jesus was essentially, "Thanks, but no thanks. We'll keep looking for a kingdom that fits our notions." It was in response to this rejection of his kingdom that Jesus said, "*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.*"

The two parables are short and similar. Both men make a sudden discovery of treasure. One man finds buried treasure; the other comes upon the perfect pearl. These parables fit the times. People in those days did frequently bury at least a portion of their assets, hoping to claim the treasure again if hard times came or if they had to flee. And sometimes they never came back for what they'd buried. As to the pearl merchant, today the diamond is the most highly concentrated form of wealth in the world. But that's a fairly recent development. In Jesus' day, it was the pearl that was valued most highly. The man who finds the treasure buried in a field, seems to find it accidentally, perhaps while he was plowing the field. The pearl merchant, on the other hand, has been sorting through pearls looking for just such a valuable pearl. But both men react the same way when they find treasure. They quickly use every means at their disposal to acquire the treasure. They sold everything they owned so as to come up with the purchase price that would make them the rightful owners of the treasure.

It is not the purpose of these parables to tell us how to acquire membership in the kingdom of heaven. It's clear from other parts of the Bible that we can't buy our way into the kingdom of God. The point of these parables is simply: Membership in Christ's kingdom is a treasure of immense value. Nothing can compare with it. Therefore, an opportunity to have membership in the kingdom should be seized at once. The gracious message of the kingdom, Christ's call to repentance and faith in him, should be believed without delay. Just a little earlier Jesus had made that point to his disciples this way: **"But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see and did not see it, and to hear what you hear and did not hear it."** (Matt. 13:16-17)

The question is, are we of the privileges we enjoy? Do we actually count ourselves rich because we're the baptized children of God? Or are we more taken with the baubles of worldly wealth? Do we continue to find membership in the kingdom of heaven such an exciting blessing that we eagerly hear and study the message of the kingdom? Or has the sheer abundance of God's mercy worked—in a way he never intended—to cause us to regard the gospel like yesterday's news? Are we still staggered by God's mercy in the invitation to join him at his kingdom's feast in Holy Communion, or do all these things

seem to us like trinkets while true treasure is to be found elsewhere? Sadly, it's too often true of us that we seem to behave as if we don't know what we've got. Rather than making the most of the golden opportunities God offers us to have the treasures of his kingdom, we often seem weighed down by worldly concerns—more like children of the world than children of the kingdom. Like a man who uses a rare coin to buy a soda at the convenience store, like the woman who pastes a valuable rare stamp on the envelope she uses to pay the PG&E bill, we sometimes act as though we don't have a clue as to what we've got as kingdom people. We can all confess, “Lord, I've been blind to your mercy and thankless for your grace.”

We do, though, have those moments of clarity as Christians, when we see just how important our membership in the kingdom really is. I thought about that a couple times in recent weeks, first, when I heard about the plan to have the body of baseball Hall of Famer Ted Williams frozen so that future medical advances might enable the slugger to live longer, and again when I happened to hear on an airport television set a part of the funeral for little Samantha Runnion. As Christians we have a better answer than the faint hopes offered by the deep freeze or by the absence of hope in a funeral sermon that amounted to little more than modern stoicism: Dying is a part of life, so keep a stiff upper lip. As members of Christ's kingdom we know that God's mercy has provided us with everything we need. We don't have to bear the guilt of our sins on our own. That would be no solution. Rather we have a King, Jesus, who came to bear away sin so that even as we daily recognize the presence of sin in our bodies, we also know that God's mercy has named us saints in his sight. We Christians don't have to settle for agnosticism, the belief that God is unknown and unknowable. We can actually know God and know the mind of God. Does that seem impossible? It's not! Jesus said that if we've seen him, we've seen the Father. And what we've seen fills us with hope, that is, a confident expectation of what lies in the future. Even in our most difficult hours, when we face sorrow, sickness, adversity, or death, the peace and joy that come from Christ prevail, because we know that God works in all things for the good of those who love him. There is no power in this world—no ill, no evil, no opponent—that can separate us from God's love in Christ.

So what would you do if you had a particularly valuable item, say, a perfect pearl or a collection of rare coins? You'd very likely take every possible measure to keep a firm grip on this property. You'd secure it, perhaps in a safe or a safety deposit box at the bank. And you'd insure your property against loss. The question isn't just theoretical. We all do have a priceless treasure. It's our Savior, Jesus, and the membership in his kingdom that comes through faith in him. Thankfully, keeping hold of this treasure doesn't depend on the strength of our grip. Jesus promises us that as we listen to his voice that he will see to our security. As we embrace his promises of life and forgiveness through his death and resurrection, our Good Shepherd will keep us guide and shield us all the way to heaven.

“In Trembling Hands” we sang a few minutes ago. That's commonly our reaction when someone places into our hands an item of great value: we tremble. It may be that we tremble both at the privilege of holding something so valuable and also at the thought of

dropping and losing something so valuable. The trembling isn't a bad thing. It shows that we realize the immense value of what we're holding. And, though we tremble, the last stanza of the hymn contains an encouraging reminder:

*“In trembling hands”—and yet we cling
With grip of steel, which you must give,
To Christ, our all, our everything,
To Christ, the life in whom we live. Amen.*

