

Kingdom Secrets: Striking Gold

Sermon preached at Foundry United Methodist Church
on Sunday, August 4, 2002
by Dean J. Snyder

Matthew 13: 44-45

We had an exciting Vacation Bible School this week - the first one at Foundry for as long as any of our most long-term members can remember. About a dozen

children participated -- some were children of our congregation, some children from our child development center, some children from our neighborhood. By the end of the week they were all our children.

What a talented group of teachers we have here at Foundry. We had storytellers, crafts teachers, music teachers, drumming teachers, game leaders. Children learned

about mission. They made sandwiches one night for Sandwich 500. My favorite

was the drumming. We learned to wait to start drumming until it was time to start and we learned to stop drumming when it was time to stop. This is an invaluable lesson for life.

So I want to say thank you to Nancy Webb and to all the teachers and volunteers who gave themselves so generously this past week to the children of our church and community.

And I also want to express my appreciation to all of you, because it is your caring and committed financial support for the ministries of Foundry Church that makes everything that happens here possible. So thank you for your faithfulness to God through Foundry Church.

This summer, I have been preaching a sermon miniseries on the theme "Kingdom

Secrets," based on the parables of Jesus found in the 13th chapter of Matthew. My overall text has been Matthew 13: 11. Jesus says to his Disciples: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven."

God's ways are not self-obvious. Matthew assumes that we can not really understand what God is up to in our lives based solely on conventional thinking.

But if we are disciples of Jesus Christ, we can know the secrets of the kingdom. Kingdom Secrets.

Let us pray: May your word, O God, nest in our hearts and take root and grow there so that we will become instruments of your kingdom. Speak to us in our

inner being, O God, we pray. Amen.

The kingdom of heaven is precious.

In all of Scripture, Jesus never comes right out and says plainly what the kingdom of heaven is. He uses metaphors and images and parables to describe it.

He uses the metaphor of a sower sowing seed. God is like a sower who sows seeds of love, and it falls on hard and thorny places in our heart, and does not take root. But God is like a sower who is so extravagant that he just keeps sowing until some seed falls on soft and tender places in our hearts and takes root, and the seed that falls on good ground brings forth a harvest of grain 100 fold or 60 or 30. This love that is born into the world when God's love grows in our hearts is the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus also uses the metaphor of a farmer. God is a farmer and an enemy plants weeds in his wheat field. There are weeds growing in the wheat fields of our lives. But the farmer says don't focus on the weeds, focus instead on the wheat. The wheat growing in our lives is the kingdom of God.

Then Jesus uses the image of yeast, because God's love isn't just a seed that grows quietly and unobtrusively. God is like a woman who puts a little yeast in a big batch of dough and the yeast bubbles and ferments and agitates and transforms the dough into something malleable that God can knead and shape. The fermentation is the kingdom of heaven.

And now Jesus tells two more parables in Matthew 13, verses 44 and 45: one about an man who discovers buried treasure in a field and who joyfully sells everything he owns to buy to buy that field.

And another about a merchant who buys pearls who one day finds the perfect pearl, and she sells everything she owns to buy the pearl of great value.

The kingdom of heaven is precious.

I am not a touchy, feely kind of guy. Twenty years ago I took the Myers-Briggs personality inventory. One of the things the test measures is whether you tend to make decisions based on your feelings or your thinking. I took the test with a group and when the leader gave us our results he had us stand against a wall according to high our score was. He said, here is the midpoint, if you scored 10 with a feeling preference stand here, if you scored 20, stand there, and so on. This is the thinking preference side. If you scored 10 with a thinking preference, stand here. If you scored 20 stand there. Then, he said: Dean, you should go stand in the next room.

For most of my life, my faith has been a matter of intellect and will. But these past several years, I have had times when I have experienced something like the presence of God in my soul. I had to change the way I live my life to experience it. Sometimes it scared me; I wanted it to stop. There were times in church, during

the years I was an honorary lay person, sitting in a pew most Sundays, when the sermon may have been boring and the music not particularly inspiring, but I would experience a presence inside me anyway. Sometimes it was so intense it scared me.

In fact, it was more scary when the sermon was boring and the music was uninspiring, because there was nothing I could credit the experience to.

Sometimes it was so intense that I would pinch Jane so that she would hit me and bring me back to earth. I'm sure the people sitting in back of us thought there was something seriously wrong with me. Once it was too much for me and I got up and left church and took a long walk until the end of the service

But that experience, even when it has been scary (even just the memory of it - even if I were never to experience it again), it is so precious to me that there is almost nothing I wouldn't give to have had that sense of the presence of God in my soul.

The kingdom of heaven is precious.

Every experience of love is precious. I *would* sell everything I own for Jane. And I know I'm not unique. Many of you would give everything you own for your spouses, partners and loved ones.

As much as I love life, I think I would literally give my life for my children.

And I know you would give your life for your children and grandchildren. Some of us would give our lives for our nieces and nephews.

We should be eternally grateful for the every experience of love we are given. Never be ashamed of love. It is the kingdom of heaven. It is precious.

I was visiting someone in the hospital once who, like many of us, was a workaholic. Due to his illness, it had been sometime since he had been able to work, and he realized that the possibility existed that he may never be able to go back to work again. It made him wonder, he said, whether it was right for him to go on living - to take the resources of society without being able to give back.

Then, he said, someone would come visit him in the hospital and tell him how much he meant to them, and it gave him the will to go on.

We literally hold other people's lives in our hands. Our expressions of love and caring can literally influence whether others have the will to live.

A lot has been said this past week about the trapped coal miners in Pennsylvania. Some have focused on the

power of prayer, and I believe that. The governor said the men were saved by their grit and determination, and I believe that. But it seems to me that the bottom-line truth is this: What saved those men ... Jane and I lived in Central Pennsylvania for several years and I know men like this. Did you notice the first thing they asked for when the rescuers broke through? Chewing tobacco. I know these men. They are tobacco-chewing, Yingling-beer-drinking, boilmaker-drinking, Pittsburgh-Steeler-fan coal miners.

And what saved them was that whenever anyone of them was on the edge of hypothermia, the others surrounded him and held him in their arms.

We are all trapped in a coal min, and the water is cold, and the only thing that will save us is that if, when anyone are about to freeze, we will surround them and hold them in our arms.

Love literally saves our lives. It is precious.

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who finds buried treasure in a field and sells everything he owns and sells it willingly and joyfully to buy that field.

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant who discovers the perfect jewel and sells everything she owns to buy that jewel and does it willingly and joyfully.

I need to tell you that there is one thing about these parables in Matthew 13: 44 and 45 that has been bothering me all week. There is something that has been bothering the editor in me.

When I was an editor it used to drive me crazy when my writers did not follow the basic principle of grammar called parallelism. Parallelism requires that we follow the same syntactical order when we list things.

This is what has been bothering me about these parables in Matthews 13: 44 and 45.

In the parable of the sower in the beginning of the chapter, the sower obviously refers to God. In the parable of the farmer and the wheat and weed, the farmer obviously refers to God. In the parable of the woman in her kitchen who puts yeast in the dough, the woman obviously refers to God.

But suddenly in these parables in verses 44 and 45, the man who finds treasurer in the field and the merchant who discovers the pearl of great price refers to us. They refer to humanity. The kingdom of heaven is so precious to us that we ought to be willing to give everything we own to experience it.

But this is not parallel expression. As an editor I would send this back to the writer and demand a rewrite.

This bothered me all week long until a strange thought came to me. What if it were parallel.

What if the man who found the buried treasure and sold everything to buy the field were God. What if the merchant who sold everything she owned to buy the pearl of great value were God.

What if Jesus was trying to tell us in these parables that the kingdom of love is so precious to God that God would give up everything to be part of it. That God would leave the divine throne in glory for the sake of the kingdom of love in our midst.

What if love were so precious to God that God was willing to leave the riches of glory and became a human being and dwell among us in order to plant the seed of love in our hearts.

There is a god who dwells at the foot of the cellar steps of my soul. That God is a stranger to me. And because this god is stranger to me I project unto this god all my fears and shame and guilt. I don't know who this god at the foot of the cellar step of my soul really is. The shadowy god down there scares me.

But we can know who God really is. We can catch a glimpse of God. God is the man who will joyfully sell everything he owns for our love. God is the merchant who will sell everything she owns for the pearl of our love.

Our love is precious to God. In Jesus Christ, God climbs the cellars steps of our souls to knock at the doors of our hearts, so that we might open the door and God will enter in and sup with us. God knocks at the doors of our hearts today as we eat this bread and drink this cup.

