

"Finding a Gem in the Junk"

Psalm 105:1-7; Matthew 13:44-48

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 9, 2017 – 5th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

As most of you know, I am a collector—antiques, letters, political pins, and all sorts of other strange and wonderful things. My wife says “strange;” I say “wonderful.”

Many years back at a collectibles show I hovered over a dozen boxes filled to the brim with old items. There was literally so much there that, after ten minutes or so, I was overwhelmed and ready to move on. The dealer must have sensed by my body language that I was about to leave. He stopped me, though, with the old ploy, “You never know when you’ll find a gem in all this junk.” Gotcha!

I recall staying a while longer at his booth and finally coming across something which I just had to have. I have no idea today what it was, but I’m sure it was good. It always is.

Well now, take for instance this seemingly common dust pan, but if you look closely at the little certification label, you’ll find that it is, indeed, out of the ordinary. It was a prop in the movie *Crimes of the Heart* starring Sissy Spacek, Diane Keaton, and Jessica Lange. Spacek won the Golden Globe award for Best Actress in her performance and was a runner-up for the Oscar. It was filmed right in the small beach community where we usually vacation.

If you watch the movie look on the wall in Diane Keaton’s kitchen. In the morning sun, a copper dustpan gleams and almost steals the scene...or at least I think it did. And now I have this little gem right here, and I can say it’s the only dustpan I’ve ever owned where I have an emotional attachment. I just had to snap it up! You have to be watchful and awake for the important things among all the mundane.

Well now, here’s where Jesus come in. Through a series of parables, he tells his hearers about the kingdom of heaven, that sense of God’s presence in the world. With vivid word pictures, he shows them that the Lord’s reign is indeed at hand. He indicates that the kingdom is here for them to seek, but he also says that the kingdom is seeking them.

Jesus begins the first of these parables with the words: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure buried in a field; which someone found and hid....”

Well, that’s fairly straightforward. In this parable the one who finds the treasure doesn’t seem to be actively looking for it, yet he recognizes its worth immediately. And what does he do then? Does he spread his good news to friends and neighbors? Not likely. Rather “...in his joy he goes and sells all that he has....”

Does he seek out the owner of the field? Well ... yes, he does. But when he has found the rightful claimant, does he say to that person, “Do you know you’ve got treasure buried in your field?” Probably not. Instead, Jesus says he “...buys that field.”

To the man's credit, he doesn't steal something that rightfully belongs to someone else. But neither is he particularly forthcoming with the owner of the field. He seeks out the titleholder and buys the entire field so that he can then claim the treasure hidden there.

It would seem that the man out walking must have gone to considerable trouble and risk to make an offer on the property. What if the treasure turned out not what it appears? That might be a possibility but he is so sure about this that he doesn't hesitate. He is of the school "see it, do it" and he reacts quickly lest his opportunity be lost.

You learn that lesson quickly as you attend antique shows. While some of the dealers may be from here in town, most come from all over the state and points beyond. The items for sale are largely unique and will be offered for only a brief time. So "you snooze, you lose." The next person into the booth may pick up the same item you were contemplating and reach for their wallet without hesitation. Or the dealer may never be back in Columbus again. You have to make quick decisions.

I can still remember that old passport I saw at one booth. Not that such documents don't sometimes come up, but this one was different and it wasn't even real!

The picture inside was of an attractive young woman who had an uncanny resemblance to actress Lauren Bacall, but the name wasn't right. I think it was Rose Cullen, but then this was the name of the heroine in *Confidential Agent*, Bacall's second picture. Another movie prop, but again one of a kind. This passport was carried by her character in the film. Thirty years ago that \$250 price tag made me put it back. Today, as you can see, I haven't forgotten what I once had in my hands. Who knows how much more it might be worth today. When you find it you must be ready to act.

The second parable that Jesus told is about a businessman. Christ begins it this way: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls...." This fellow is likely a dealer in expensive jewels, ornamental stones, and top quality pearls.

Every day he actively searches for fine items without flaw or blemish. The trader knows his business and is an expert in rating specimens. He is not someone stumbling over something of worth, as the guy walking through a field. This is an astute merchant looking for value and who knows what the real thing looks like. He buys and sells daily and isn't easily deceived.

Jesus continues "on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." Apparently this was the most exceptional pearl that he had ever seen and he knew he must have it, whatever the cost, even if it meant liquidating everything he owned to get hold of this exceptional piece. Was he a fool? Hardly. Would he sacrifice his wealth on a whim? Totally out of character.

Both these men in Jesus' parables size up their situation quickly because they have spent so many years in their quest. They see clearly what they need and do what they must to take advantage of their opportunity. Whatever sacrifice they appear to make is really no sacrifice at all. So sure were they of what was at hand that they probably didn't care what anyone else thought.

The point of these vignettes is that both treasures in question are invaluable. The kingdom of God, Jesus says, is like that as well. Many seek it, but perhaps look in the wrong places, Then one day they discover this spiritual treasure unexpectedly; and when they find it, this promises a fullness of meaning to life.

Unexpectedly they may stumble over it while not even looking, like the fellow in the field. Others carefully examine every possibility, but never find their quest until it appears right in front of them, like the merchant. The point, Jesus says, is to recognize your soul's natural desire however and wherever you find it, and then do everything needed to secure it. He tells us we may have to be ready to give up everything lesser in order to get it and keep it.

The third parable of Jesus is similar to the first two, but it also differs in an important way. He begins: "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind...." Note that here the kingdom of heaven is not represented by the sea, nor by the fisherman, nor by the boat, but by the net. Continuing he said, "when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad."

While the emphasis in the first two parables puts the onus on what people should do when the kingdom is right there before them, here they are recipients of the action of another—in this case, God. So, not only do we search for the kingdom, but the kingdom also reaches for us. It's a two-way street! God comes to us but we must complete the circle by coming to God.

Each of these images of finding, or being found, requires some response on our part. The field walker and the pearl merchant are examples of how we must be ready to act when favorable circumstances present themselves. We can't be half-hearted if we are to find the benefits of a closer relationship with God as understood through Jesus. Note that neither man in our opening parables could have moved forward without readiness for making a total commitment.

There's an old adage that you get what you pay for. When you buy on the cheap, that's what you usually get. I have what appears to be two Chinese coins that look very similar. One is turned out by the tens of thousands to look like an old mintage. It's probably just a few years old and was given to me free at an imports store as a promotion.

This other coin is authentic and from the Ching Dynasty. It was issued during the reign of Emperor Kao Tsung which began in 1736. This cost me some real money, but it has real value. It's a reminder that we receive back in proportion to what we are willing to invest.

Our life is the most precious gift we will ever receive. In our few years on earth we should strive to live each day to the fullest. So take what gifts God offers you, recognize their worth, and make the most of the time you do have.

Jesus' lesson for us today is be on the ready and don't squander your opportunity when it's right there before you.