



Roanoke, Virginia

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***“Again”***

*Part I of the Summer Sermon Series, “Hidden Treasure.”*

*Matthew 13:44-52*

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Today we begin a short sermon series on the parables of Jesus. For some of us, these parables are familiar, stories we’ve heard regularly throughout our lives. For others, these parables will be new, a first foray into deciphering the mystery of Jesus’ favorite storytelling format. I truly believe that both of these perspectives are important—that as the word falls on ears that are familiar and on ears that are fresh, God will have good and challenging truths to offer all of us.

So with that hope in mind, let’s turn to the parables. We begin with three, read together, from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 13. Listen for the word of God:

<sup>44</sup> “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

<sup>45</sup> “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; <sup>46</sup> on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

<sup>47</sup> “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; <sup>48</sup> when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. <sup>49</sup> So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.



<sup>51</sup> “Have you understood all this?” [The disciples] answered, “Yes.” <sup>52</sup> And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

“Have you understood all this?” Jesus asks.

Over lunch one day during our Senior High Mission Trip to Kentucky, we somehow found ourselves deep in a discussion about heaven. Somewhere in the midst of peanut butter sandwiches and Oreo cookies, one of the youths started asking questions. What will heaven be like? Will my parents be there? How old will I be? What will we do?

So we talked about it. We talked about how there’s not many specifics in Scripture, that the Bible doesn’t lay out these answers for us. We talked about love, and justice, and freedom from pain. We talked about how the family of God includes but is bigger than our human concepts of family. We talked about what it will be like to be always aware of God’s presence and glory.

But, most importantly, we talked about how we should always be suspicious when someone starts talking about heaven with certainty. The minute that someone tells you that they know what heaven is like, that they know how to boil down the grandeur and mystery of God’s forever home into words that are inherently limited by our human experience, proceed with caution. If we’re listening, really listening, to what Jesus says about the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, we have to be more patient. Easy answers about what God is like ultimately will not satisfy. We’re playing the long game here, seeking for answers that only begin to take shape when you ask the question again, and again, and again.

The parables of Jesus are the epitome of this quest. Parables are just stories or images, but they’re stories that point beyond themselves. Sometimes, at face value, they function like allegories, with each aspect of the story lining up with some part of our life of faith. But even when they do, they always mean more than just one thing. The kingdom of heaven is not just a treasure or a person or a field. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. That’s what the kingdom of heaven is like. Do you see the difference?

When approaching the parables, the natural question for most of us is, “What does the parable mean?”

But perhaps the more important question is, “What does the parable *do*?” What truths does it remind me of? What emotional reaction does it provoke in me? How does it refine my thinking? Where does it confront my thinking? My choices? My desires? My actions? Where does it cause a disturbance in my soul?

Take the story of the treasure in the field. The man finds it, hides it, and then buys the field where the treasure lies hidden. When I read it looking for meaning, I look for ways to find the correct correlation – is the kingdom represented by the treasure or the field? Does the man represent God finding us who belong to the kingdom? Or are we supposed to see *ourselves* in the



man, buying a whole entire field to attain one particular treasure? These questions are a good place to start. But when I consider what this parable does, suddenly my questions change. I notice how I am inspired by the man's joyful willingness to buy the whole field in order to attain the treasure. I'm convicted of my own lack of joy when I think about how pursuing God's kingdom might require personal cost. I start to wonder: what would our lives look like if we lived as though every field or every moment or every person we encountered had hidden within them something beautiful and pure, something of God?

But before I can wonder very long, we're onto the next story about a profit seeking merchant who, in the midst of his search for treasures of a lesser value, finds one flawless pearl and sells literally everything he has to buy it. What happens when you hear this story? Do you find yourself more deeply trusting of the love that God has for you, because you see God in the merchant's actions, and you understand that God would give everything up in order to claim you as his own? Or do you hear a personal call to real and significant sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom? A parable like this one can make you nervous.

But perhaps more nerve wracking is the next parable, the story about the net, a story that at face value does not seem ambiguous at all. The net drags up everything, and only what is good gets saved, and that's what the kingdom is like. But the net drags up everything, and that's also what the kingdom is like. And anyway, the good and the bad aren't separated until the net comes out of the water, so you can be sure that any sorting we try to do as we're being dragged along is decidedly none of our business. So where do we find ourselves as we hear this story? Are we helping alongside the fisherman hoping and praying that this will be a really good catch? Are we caught up in the net with the good fish, waiting for the day when we'll finally be separated from the debris that got caught up with us? Is righteousness something we make happen by our determined efforts? Can we make ourselves be good fish? Or is righteousness something that happens to us as we're swept up in the all-encompassing net of God's justice and love?

Have you understood all this? Do the parables leave you feeling curious? Inspired? Confused? Ok.

I think Jesus expected that. How could we not be confused? We can't even agree on what Jesus meant when he said straightforward things like, "Love your enemies." With stories like these, of course we're confused. But I think that's why Jesus gave so many parables, so many different angles, so many opportunities for understanding, so many ways in. The kingdom of God is a mystery, and there is no one human story or image that can encapsulate the mystery of God. Parables each give us a glimpse, and we need a lot of them to get a clearer and clearer understanding of the whole picture.

Because as we listen, and listen again, and again, and as the vision of the kingdom of heaven grows clearer and brighter in our minds and hearts and souls, we begin to learn how to recognize signs of the kingdom all around us, breaking into our world.



I think first of the sacraments, both of which we celebrate today. Signs and seals of the abiding presence and power of God, little parables in their own right, reminding, comforting, assuring, guiding, and challenging us to live as faithful people, confident in our identity as beloved children of God.

But I think also about a shy little boy in Kentucky, who spent a week silently watching seven strangers working on his roof. Towards the end of the week, he walked up to one young woman in the group and, with grave sincerity, presented her with a carefully selected bouquet of weeds. But from the joy and gratitude in her response as she received them, you would have thought they were roses. The kingdom of heaven is like that.

I think about a hospital that is being built in a country far from here. Construction stops and starts, bureaucracy gets in the way, but the builders keep on working because they believe in the vision that this community, where people have often had little to no access to quality healthcare, can and will flourish when they have the resources they need. The kingdom of heaven is like that.

I think about one of the middle school boys we met at Massanetta Middle School Conference last month; a boy who others sometimes teased, but who had the kindest disposition of anyone I've met. In the middle of an activity, the speaker asked us to turn to our neighbor and briefly share what we think God is like. I was on the end of a row and didn't have a neighbor, so I sat quietly by myself. This young man was sitting behind me, and he noticed. When the activity was over, everyone else got up and hurried away, but he looked me in the eye and asked, "Rachel, what do *you* think God is like?" The kingdom of heaven is like that.

This is what the parables do—they teach us to look at the world like it's full to the brim with the mystery of God. Because it is. In the bread and the cup, in acts of friendship and faith, in the exceptional and in the mundane—the kingdom of heaven is beginning to break through.

It's almost as if Jesus is saying to each one of us: Have you understood all this? No? That's ok. Let's try again. The kingdom of heaven is like... And again, the kingdom of heaven is like... And again... And again... And again.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

