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Good  
News  
from the  
Pews

Doug  
Poland



*Buying the  
Field*

Sunday, July 30, 2023

“Buying the Field”

Doug Poland | Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

<sup>31</sup> He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

<sup>33</sup> He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with[e] three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

<sup>44</sup> “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; 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?” They answered, “Yes.” <sup>52</sup> And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

<sup>53</sup> When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

What is a parable? Contemporary Christian theologian and historical Jesus scholar John Dominic Crossan defines parables in this way:

[A parable] is a lure or a provocation for active thought. It’s trying to provoke you; to make you think; and then to do something about it. It’s trying to lure you into action, but before you act, you have to think.

Parables in the gospel according to Matthew — indeed in any of the gospels — do not contain a set of facts or data that hold one meaning. A parable is not a static presentation of information like a TV show you may or may not want to watch twice because you know what will happen. In fact, parables are not intended to convey any particular idea, or to hold a specific *meaning*, at all. That is one reason why it is hard not to laugh out loud when, according to Matthew, the Twelve disciples emphatically answer “Yes!” When Jesus asks them if they have understood all that he told them in parables. Color me skeptical.

But that does not mean that Jesus did not intend his parables, such as the ones in today’s scripture reading, to provoke his listeners to think about specific *topics*. And no topic was more important to Jesus’ ministry and to his life than the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, a reality that he taught is present and accessible to us, yet unfinished. Matthew grouped his parables to encourage listeners to think about different aspects of Jesus’ message about the kingdom of God. In the first grouping of parables in this morning’s reading, those of the mustard seed and the leaven in three measures of flour, Jesus provided stories that required listeners to think about what the kingdom of heaven looks like and how it comes into being in unexpected ways. The parables in the second grouping, including the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great value, have a different focus. Having provoked his listeners through the first grouping of parables to imagine what the kingdom of God looks like, in this second set of parables, Jesus is now trying to prod his listeners to think about what they must do to bring that kingdom into being. In other words, he is trying to provoke them to consider: When we see a vision of what the kingdom looks like, how do we react? What do we do in response?

About 15 years ago, not long after Amy and I had moved to Madison and joined this congregation, I had my first experience with adult education classes at Covenant. One of the classes that I remember most vividly was a class on the Gospel according to Matthew, led by then-co-Pastor Steve Minnema. What I recall in particular about that class was our discussion of the parables in Matthew, and how their meaning might be interpreted. And most specifically, I remember seizing on the parable of the hidden treasure. I don’t remember now why that particular parable so captured my attention, but something about it did, and I was particularly curious about just what Jesus meant in telling it. There is the most obvious interpretation, one that you will see or hear in nearly every book or podcast on Biblical exegesis, and it is a good one: that the kingdom of heaven is so fantastic, so wonderful, that we must be prepared to give up all that we have to gain it. But what really baffled me about the parable was this

question: If the treasure in the Matthew parable was hidden, that means that someone other than the finder must have hidden it in the first place. But who? And why? And why was it still buried there, remaining to be found?

My experience with that study of Matthew's gospel, and my fixation on the parable of the hidden treasure, was further piqued by my discussions with Dan Little, one of the retired pastors who attended worship services and adult education classes at that time. Some of you might remember Dan, whose daughter, Deb Cohn, remains an active member of this congregation. Dan was an amazing man whose wisdom and presence are difficult to express in words. He was one of the first graduates of McCormick Theological Seminary trained specifically in urban ministry. After a long and storied career in Presbyterian churches and seminaries throughout the United States, Dan retired to Madison in 1999 to be near Deb and her family.

Right around the time that I was wrestling with the parable of the hidden treasure in Matthew's gospel, Dan was wrestling with far more consequential struggles of his own. His wife, Joan, whom he had met in seminary six decades earlier, was dying, and Dan was caring for her. Then, after Joan died, Dan was diagnosed with brain cancer, and began to undergo treatments himself. Through all of this, Dan, too, was grappling with the parable of the hidden treasure. In a thinly veiled autobiographical book years later, Steve Minnema related a comment about the parable that Dan had made while recovering from brain surgery. Writing as "Pastor Bill," Steve tells the words of Dan — here, referred to as "Jack" — in this way:

*The surgery had gone well but it was the aftermath that had been so remarkable. Over and over, as visitors made their way to Jack's bedside, they heard this man who had made words his life, struggling to find any adequate expression to describe the exquisite – nearly ecstatic - euphoria that he had somehow been permitted to sip. Listening and observing closely, Pastor Bill had had the sense that the longstanding barrier between his friend's head and his heart had finally been penetrated such that what he had always known and proclaimed about the preciousness of life and the grace behind it was now being fully felt and personally appropriated. Or perhaps one could say that the treasure borne by this particular clay vessel was – as a comfort to its faithful bearer in the hour of his distress - offering him a clear glimpse of its inestimable value.*

*Groping for an image that might convey the importance of what had befallen him, Jack was led – as if by some precise inner compass – to a text whose meaning for him in the months ahead would prove inexhaustible. “I am the man in Jesus’ parable,” [Jack] told Pastor Bill a few days after the surgery, “who found the priceless treasure but had to buy the whole damn field in order to have it.”*

I recently reached out to Deb and her brother — Dan Junior, a sixth-generation Presbyterian pastor in Texas — to ask them whether they recalled their father’s comments about buying “the whole damn field.” I am grateful to them both for providing rich and thoughtful recollections of their father’s reference to the parable and allowing me to include them in this sermon. Dan Junior provided this insight: “In 1977, our dad was hired to the top national staff position in [what is now the PCUSA]. Over the next couple of years, our dad took a couple of extended foreign trips to visit sister churches. One trip took him to South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. The other trip took him to Mexico, Peru, Argentina, Uruguay, and Colombia. At that time, most of the countries in South America had military governments or, if they were civilian governments, they were tremendously repressive. Much of the Protestant Church’s work in South America in the late 1970’s revolved around supporting the poor and dispossessed in their respective countries. I believe our dad was in Montevideo, Uruguay on a Sunday when he went to church. He told me about the sermon which the pastor preached -- on the parable of the treasure in the field. The preacher had to be careful with what he said because it was always assumed that the government had spies in the churches to keep tabs on preachers. My dad said the sermon was quite simple. There was a man who found a great treasure -- a treasure beyond compare. I assume the preacher was talking about freedom and dignity against crushing oppression. But then the preacher said that the man didn’t just get the treasure, but that he had to buy the whole field. I am guessing that the preacher meant that in order to get the treasure, the man also had to accept the hardship and danger and persecution that went with that treasure. We never simply get the treasure -- it always comes with a cost and a burden -- but the treasure makes it worth it.”

Reflecting further, Dan Jr. and Deb identified for me some ways in which their father might have viewed his life experiences as the treasure in the parable itself:

- the way that his family cared for him through his illness;
- his faith, which was not only focused on salvation after death, but on profound meaning in life, even when his life was greatly constrained by brain cancer;

- the appreciation of what he was able to do in his life -- everything from being a husband and father, to being a pastor and church leader, to singing on Ed Sullivan;
- being able to have moments when he felt truly human -- a mystical and profound tangle of hope, fear, dread, and peace.

With those profound reflections in mind, revisiting the question about the parable of the hidden treasure that earlier had occurred to me but left me without any answer, I began to wonder: What if the treasure remained in the field because it was hidden by someone who failed to buy the field? What if, even having recognized the value of the treasure, the person who found it simply buried it, without taking the actions necessary to retain it? What if there is treasure that God provides for us every day, that is waiting there for us to accept, that can be ours if we just make the decision to take the actions necessary to retain it, but we decline to do so?

In his book, *The Power of Parable*, John Dominic Crossan writes that in the parable of the hidden treasure “Jesus is not just announcing to his audience that God’s kingdom is now present. He is announcing that it is only present if and when it is accepted, entered into, and taken upon oneself. If discussion and debate, agreement and disagreement, argument and contradiction do not arise from and because of [Jesus’] challenges, then no change in consciousness can take place, no paradigm shift can occur, and no kingdom of God can be present. ... [I]t is present only by a divine-human participation and a divine-human collaboration. It is a treasure and a pearl demanding a transformation of the old and known past into a new and unknown future.” Put another way by Bishop Desmond Tutu: “God, without us, will not; as we, without God, cannot.”

Viewed in this way, it seems to me the treasure itself and the act of buying the field are one and the same; they are inseparable. The treasure cannot be obtained without buying the field, but the act of buying the field itself — the intentional act of choosing to undertake living life fully, despite and including the struggles, the pain, the sacrifices made in serving others, but also the deep love, companionship, friendships, and communion that we experience along the way — that is also the treasure.

Dan Little stands as an example of someone whose lifetime of faithful service to the ministry of Jesus Christ and whose penetrating self-awareness allowed him to realize, at the end of his life, that he had enjoyed the blessings of the priceless treasure that

God made available to him because he had “bought the whole damn field.” That causes me to wonder - as the parable provokes us all to do: Have I done the same? Am I doing the same? What does it look like when we see or experience the priceless treasure but we balk at the commitment that is necessary to buy the whole field — we only want the treasure?

- We have been blessed with a world of beauty and bounty — lakes, oceans, forests, wildlife. It is a priceless treasure, entrusted to our care and stewardship. Yet our planet is on fire, and we have gone, in the words of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, from global warming to global boiling, with new record high land and sea temperatures being set daily, and the collapse of arctic and Antarctic sea ice. How do each of us “buy the field” to preserve the treasure that is our natural world?
- We have been blessed with a city, a state, a nation, and a world of people — a creation that God called “very good” — in whom we can find friendship, support, and assistance. Yet we read daily media accounts of increasingly bold public expressions of hatred and disregard for basic human dignity — such as White Nationalism that blasphemously claims to be “Christian,” or razor wire stretched across rivers on the southern US border to keep non-US citizens from entering the country. What is each of us doing to “buy the field” so that each and every child of God - including ourselves - can experience the love, friendship, compassion, and sense of belonging and beloved-ness that God intends for us?
- We have been blessed with personal relationships of family and relationships of intimacy with partners or spouses that bring us the treasures of love, joy, acceptance, forgiveness, and belonging. But sometimes those people who are closest to us are in despair, crisis, or need because of physical, mental health, or other challenges. How do we “buy the field” to retain that treasure? Do we do as Dan Little did, and buy the field by caring for his wife, Joan, through all of the difficulties posed by her illness, and as I have seen my own parents do by caring for and supporting each other through every hardship, including cancer treatment and recovery, over 60 years of marriage? Or, do we turn away when retaining the treasure requires a greater cost to us than we thought?

When and where in our lives have we caught glimpses of the treasure of God’s kingdom that is here, present and available to us now; the kingdom that Jesus teaches is both within us, and among us? And once we have found that treasure, what have we done, or what are we doing, to order, or to reorder, our lives so that they are

fundamentally transformed and centered around the Hebraic concept of shalom, described by pastor and anti-racist peacemaker Osheta Moore as “God’s dream for the world as it should be, nothing missing, nothing broken, everything made whole.” The lure, as Dominic Crossan puts it, has been cast. It is up to us, individually and corporately, to think, and then to act, as Jesus calls us to do. May God bless us all with the insight, patience, perseverance, and committed faithfulness to do so. Amen.