

The Pearl of Great Value

Matthew 13:44-46

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When my oldest child, Weldon, was in first grade, we lived in Texas, and he attended Tree Tops School. One of the features of that school was that all classes, from first grade through high school, went on a multi-day field trip each year. Weldon's first field trip was a camping adventure to Diamond Crater State Park in Murfreesboro, Arkansas.

Diamond Crater State Park is just a huge, flat, open field where real diamonds and other gems have been discovered over the years. Most of the gems are of questionable value, but that does not deter the guests from hoping as they dig. It is a wonderful experience for elementary age children, and really, for anyone who likes to dig in the dirt.

So, throughout the spring semester, the first- and second-graders at Tree Tops School did lessons on geology and gem stones. Then in April, they all boarded a charter bus, with duffle bags full of digging and screening equipment and camping gear and hearts full of hope. Weldon was sure he would return with a real treasure.

Five days later, all the parents were waiting at the school for the bus to return. We expected children to just tumble off, excited to tell us their stories, but instead, there was this long, LONG silence. Total stillness. Then the bus door

opened and one teacher stepped out. "Before you see your kids," she announced, "you need to know ... that we got rained on. A lot. It rained from the time we arrived till the moment we left. Your children and everything they own are covered in mud. We're really sorry. We did our best."

Then, all the mud-caked six- and seven-year-olds got off the bus. They were really tired from their adventure and from their long drive home, but they were also so proud of themselves for being away from home on a real camping trip without Mom or Dad, and every one of them had a treasure. Weldon had a pillowcase full of mud-covered rocks. The park ranger had told him that one of them, Weldon didn't remember exactly which one, but one of them might be a diamond.

There was no way to save that pillow case. It was ruined, along with most of the stuff in Weldon's duffle. But the "diamonds" Weldon had found, they remained on his window sill forever. He treasured them first because they were gems, or at least they MIGHT be gems. He didn't want to throw out any of them because he would be throwing out the one that might be a diamond. Later, Weldon treasured those stones because they were souvenirs of that wonderful, rain-soaked, mud-covered adventure away from home for the first time, proof that he was growing up.

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"The Kingdom of Heaven," Jesus said, "is like a 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. Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls.

On finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it." A hidden treasure. A pearl of great value.

Last week we heard a scribe offer to follow Jesus, and Jesus responded, "I have nowhere to lay my head." Count the cost, Jesus says. Following me is not easy. This week, we hear Jesus talk about cost again – about selling all that we have – but we also hear the other side of the story. The Kingdom of Heaven is so valuable that it is worth the cost. It is worth everything that we have.

If you look closely at these two parables, you can see that – though they sound a lot alike – they are intriguingly different. In the first, parable, Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven is the buried treasure. A man happens upon it, realizes its true value, and gives up all that he has in order to claim this treasure. The Kingdom of Heaven is the treasure itself, and giving up everything we have to claim the treasure is not sacrifice but pure joy.

But the second parable is different. Jesus doesn't say that the Kingdom of Heaven is a priceless pearl. No, he says that the Kingdom of Heaven is the merchant, who seeks pearls, the merchant who would give everything to have this pearl of great value. The Kingdom of Heaven is seeking US, and God will give everything for us, because God recognizes the sheer beauty, the incomparable worth of each human soul.

I love the symmetrical convergence of these two stories. We know, we hope, we dream that there is a sacred treasure out there somewhere, in some muddy field, just waiting for us to find it. And somehow, we stumble across it, like Weldon and his classmates digging for diamonds. We may not be elegant in our search, but we are always looking for God. And at the very same time, God is seeking us, seeing value in us, giving everything for us.

The Kingdom of Heaven is not later; it is now. The Kingdom of Heaven is not "out there" somewhere; it is "in here" (in our hearts) and "in here" (in this church). The Kingdom of Heaven happens here and now, when our bumbling search for God and God's insistent seeking for us come together. Then God's love is visible in each heart here. And the light of God shines through, us for all to see.

Thanks be to God!

Amen