

Sunday: Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: July 26, 2020

Text: Matthew 13:44-52

Title:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

When I was growing up, in the wilderness of Central California, I attended the school associated with my church. First and Second grade at Emmanuel Lutheran School was taught by Mr. Will. There are a few things that are memorable from those school days. One thing I remember was sitting in our classroom eating lunch while Mr. Will played the Paul Harvey news on the radio. I vividly remember the transition he would use as he would segue from his first page to an advertisement and then more news stories. Mr. Harvey would say “and now page 2.”

Mr. Harvey had a segment entitled “The Rest of the Story”. In it he would share details about someone or something that had happened in history, leaving out references that would reveal who or what he was talking of. You would be led to speculate as to the identity of the subject through the commercials that would air. When he would return, he would begin with “and now the rest of the story.” It was at this point that he would reveal the person, place, or thing that his story was about. Once he disclosed the identity, it was easy to fit all the pieces together. Before the grand reveal, you could guess, but would most likely be off track.

The parables in our Gospel reading are somewhat like that. There are three short parables told by Jesus to the disciples that need to be put together to truly understand what Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of heaven. Our tendency as humans, impatient humans at that, is to take one parable and figure it out, then move to the second and interpret it, then move to the third and resolve the uncertainties. This is one way to do it, but when taking each of these parables in isolation, we miss the grand reveal of the rest of the story Jesus is conveying.

At first blush, the parable of the treasure in the field, the parable of the pearl of great price, and the parable of the catch of fish seem disjointed. Just as the facts Paul Harvey would relate to his listeners were couched in such a way as to draw his listeners to wait for the rest of the story. Jesus’ parables today call us to hold in

tension the three parables and hear the rest of the story as they are tied together by the Holy Spirit.

As we look at these parables today, we must remember that Jesus is painting a picture through his words. He is artfully creating an image of what the kingdom of heaven is like.

As Jesus began his Galilean ministry, Matthew writes, “From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). Where Jesus ventured, the kingdom of heaven was with him. This carries forward to the parable we have heard the last few weeks, including today. Matthew 13 contains 5 reign of heaven, or kingdom of heaven, parables.

Much ink and even more breath has been poured out on these parables identifying at least the parable of the treasure in the field and the pearl, as parables relating to discipleship. Jesus had previously talked with the rich man about his need to sell all his possessions, give to the poor, and follow him to inherit eternal life. From that encounter it is pretty apparent that Jesus knew the man would not be able to do that. I can’t think of many people who have accumulated wealth and possessions that could abandon it all. It is not something that is easily accomplished. In fact, if one thinks they can purchase heaven by ridding themselves of possessions they are wrong. It is not possible for mankind to purchase directly or indirectly a place in the heavenly kingdom.

As Christians, and especially as Lutherans, we look at the Scriptures through the lens of Christ. We have a Christocentric view of God’s Word. In the “reign” parables if there is a lone human figure acting in the symbolic narrative, that figure always represents (more generally ) God or (specifically) Jesus, and when there are multiple characters with one in central position, that central character always represents God/Jesus. In each of the parables today, there is only one character identified. Utilizing this framework, we see the main character as Jesus. This changes the whole focus of the parables today away from a story of Christian stewardship to one of what Christ has done. This interpretation will help us make better sense of the common refrain to these parables, that the man sold all that he had to buy the field or the pearl.

If the man/merchant and his remarkable action of selling all his possessions in order to buy an extremely valuable object represents the present reign of heaven in Jesus, then one has to ask what the “treasure” and the “pearl” stand for. As Jesus has moved away from the crowds at this point and is speaking to his disciples only,

it is apparent he is not casting a wide net, so to speak, in his identification of the desired object. His location apart from the crowds and the Pharisees implies that they are not the treasure. His intimate setting with His disciples points us in the direction of interpretation that they are the treasure. In Matthew 6:19-21 Jesus uses the term treasure as he teaches about the dangers of material wealth, so not material “treasure” but spiritual “treasure” is what Jesus offers to his disciples. This is supported by Jesus when in Matthew 12:35 he speaks about an evil man and his evil treasure and a good man and his good treasure. There Jesus is teaching that the inner life of a person is the source of his worth. Jesus has given his disciples the gift of faith, the gift of spiritual renewal through faith in the promise of the Messiah found in Jesus.

Exploring this further, if the Man/merchant in 13:44-46 represents Christ in his deeds of manifesting the reign of God, then Jesus’ chosen disciples are the treasure and the pearl. This is difficult for many to accept, in part, because this image is simply an expression of divine grace. Jesus’ disciples—then and now—are clearly nothing special in themselves. In God’s royal rule, however, they are to their Father a treasure and a pearl.

This reading agrees with the explanation of the parable of the wheat and the weeds where we heard the eschatological destiny of the righteous is to “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matthew 13:43). Having been called by Jesus to believe and follow, his disciples are the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13-16).

What Jesus is accomplishing in restoring God’s reign in Israel and the world is compared to the action of a man who, because he had found an object of great value, extravagantly sold all that he possessed in order to purchase that valued object and to make it his own. Jesus himself is that man. Jesus entire ministry, culminating in his death and resurrection, can be compared to that extravagant action of purchasing.

Jesus gave up everything to take on human flesh for the purpose of purchasing fallen humanity from the condemnation it deserves. Jesus gave up equality with God, as Paul reminds us in Philippians 2:5-8,

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And

being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus gave up his glory to redeem the corrupt and fallen creation, reminding us of his former glory in the High Priestly prayer of John 17 saying

[Father] I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed (John 17:4-5).

Jesus emptied himself, took on human flesh at his incarnation, lived and died to purchase the treasure of his followers, disciples past, present, and future. Christ paid the price for our sins. In the explanation to the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed we hear "The Rest of the Story":

Jesus Christ true God. . . is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom.

Jesus told these parables to the disciples in the context of growing opposition to him by the religious leaders at the time. Discouragement was rising as the crowds failed to flock to Jesus as the disciples thought they should. Jesus' message for the disciples and for us today who struggle with the same challenges and discouragement, is a picture of hope. These parables bring an image and message of assurance and comfort. The man/merchant did whatever it took in order to possess what he valued so highly, even to the point of selling everything he had. So has Jesus done what needed to be done to possess his holy Christian church on earth today. Though we disciples may often feel buried under the challenges and dangers presented by our own sinful flesh, by the hostile world around us, and by the great enemy and father of lies, there need be no doubt that we belong to Jesus. We have been acquired. Christ has purchased us at the price of everything that he had. In the breathtaking reckoning of grace, we are as a treasure to him. In this parable we see Christ for us; Christ for you and Christ for me. Secure in the work of Christ for us we can continue to follow him in confidence.

It is in this confidence we see ourselves remaining in the world, as wheat among the weeds, a treasure hidden in a field. When Christ returns, we will shine like the sun in the kingdom of our Father.

The third parable today reinforces the assurance of the final outcome for the disciples of Christ. Speaking a message reinforcing the interpretation of the weed in the wheat field, Jesus brings home again the ultimate outcome for remaining faithful. While Jesus' disciples remain in the world with all types of people, faithful and unfaithful, the ultimate outcome would be determined by God in his judgement. The mission of proclaiming the gospel must go on even in turbulent waters or times. It is Jesus who makes fishers of men. Through Jesus' words and deeds and those of his disciples after him, calling people to salvation and discipleship, the mission continues. All kinds of sea creatures will be gathered into the visible community, both good and rotten, but what of that? The angels will sort it out on the great day. Jesus' disciples, the treasure he gave up everything to purchase, are called to not lose heart, but to follow him persisting in faith to life everlasting.

The rest of the Story is that Christ gave up everything for you. You are the treasure in the field; you are the pearl of great value. By grace you have been saved and purchased by Christ. Amen.