

“What a Gift”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Matthew 13: 44-50

When people have asked me, “What was your favorite part of your sabbatical?” I’ve often said just living and experiencing different cultures. That was the blessing of being able to be in different places for 2 or 4 weeks at a time. It’s hard to experience that when you’re somewhere for only one week. So, to live in these amazing places for such a significant time was a great gift, and by far the most enjoyable part of our renewal time.

One of the fun aspects of living in Britain for a month was watching British television. It’s improved a great deal from when Debbie and I lived there in 1998 – only four channels then; now about 24 or so. But the Brits are quirky and eccentric, and we enjoyed relaxing in the evening watching our favorite shows.

The Brits love their antiques – probably because they have such a plethora of them. So there are many television shows which center on people bringing in their old china plate, a pocket knife found in a drawer, a drawing uncovered in grandma’s house, or some other piece of, well, junk, and then see what it’s worth. Many of the shows have people bring in an antique or find an antique, and then take it to an auction to see how much someone will pay for it. My takeaway from watching those shows is anyone will pay an incredible amount of money for something which I think is junk!

In many ways, though, these shows, like ones we have here in the United States, depict modern-day treasure-hunters. Of course, those treasures are all relative. What one person sees as junk, another person may consider priceless. It becomes a treasure through the perspective of the one who owns it, seeks it, or finds it. And in discovering that such a treasure is theirs, much rejoicing and gratitude usually follows.

Over the last two weeks, we have heard Jesus compare the kingdom of heaven to a sower who sows seeds on all types of soil, and eventually, on the good soil, abundant, miraculous yields come forth. He has compared the kingdom to the subversive nature of a mustard seed and yeast, which acts in hidden, intrusive ways to effect change and growth as only God can. The kingdom is not something far off; it is germinating inside us all, waiting for a harvest that is bountiful and transformative.

Today, Jesus follows these kingdom parables in the Gospel of Matthew with three more. But they are stories which speak of treasures which are found, treasures which were hidden and found again, and a

fishing net cast out into the sea and bringing into the boat a great catch, which is then sorted. And while they each appear to have a different focus, they all reflect a common response to the kingdom of heaven: thankfulness, gratitude, and deep appreciation.

One key distinction between the parables we've talked about the last two weeks and today's parables is the intended audience. The three parables which follow the first two are not spoken to the crowds as a whole, but instead to Jesus' disciples in private (13:36). As such, they are meant to prepare them for what the kingdom will require for discipleship. Jesus first says that the kingdom "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" (13:44). Maybe he was a farm hand, maybe she was a house-servant — whoever it was, that person in his parable did not expect to find such a treasure in that field. That is what the kingdom is: an unexpected surprise which we were not looking for.

Then, Jesus says that the kingdom "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" (13:45-46). In this case, the individual was searching for that treasure, the item or answer which had been his life's passion. It is not a fruitless endeavor: the search yields an answer, the jewel that had eluded him all his life. And although these two parables differ as to how the treasure is sought — one being a surprise, the other a relentless pursuit — both hold the same reaction for the individual. ". . . in his joy he goes and sells all that he has . . . he went and sold all that he had and bought it." That is what the kingdom is: whether a total surprise or fulfillment of constant yearning, it is worth nothing less than our complete sacrifice so we might know its benefits.

Finally, Jesus says that the kingdom "is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad" (13:47-48). The kingdom will one day bring home all of us within the realm of God's reach, and we will eventually be sorted, the good from the bad. Jesus' pronouncement sends chills up your spine: "The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (13:50). Where will we fall among the good and bad, amid the evil and righteous? Are we to fear this ultimate sorting by Jesus, who "will judge the living and the dead?" (Apostle's Creed)

No matter how much we worry, how much we fear God's wrath or Jesus' judgment, it matters not, for we can do nothing of the sorting which ultimately is God's alone. The kingdom's reach is everlasting, and we know that our day before Christ will come. As we say in the new catechism, "I too must stand in fear and trembling before the judgment seat of Christ. But the Judge is the one who submitted to judgment for

my sake . . . The limits to salvation, whatever they may be, are known only to God” (Questions 48-49, New Study Catechism).

What these parables share in common, and what unites all of these teachings of Jesus on the kingdom of heaven, is a call to live lives of gratitude in response to God’s gracious gift. When God’s love surprises us like an unexpected treasure, we offer our praise and thanksgiving to God. After much discernment and longing for change is followed by God’s providence and intervention, we offer our praise and thanksgiving to God. When our worry and anxiety about the future is relieved by our knowledge that the judge is “the one who submitted to judgment for our sake,” we offer our praise and thanksgiving to God.

It is not easy to view life as a gift when we are neck-deep in the stresses of life. When our marriage and family is falling apart all around us, how can we be thankful? When our health or the health of someone we love is deteriorating without any good explanations, how can we be hopeful? When our work is consuming us with the mundane and tedious, how can we be inspired? When our world-view is only narrowing and turning inward, how can we be grateful for this life?

I know that was my world-view a year ago. I know that I had allowed myself to become so inward-looking that I was unable to view my life with gratitude. I believe the church, in many ways, had also lost perspective on what was important. And maybe you can readily identify with this feeling, either from the past, or you are feeling it today in the present.

I kept a journal during my sabbatical. It was an online-blog that I shared with a handful of family and close friends. It was both a way to share about our travels during sabbatical, and to reflect on learnings I experienced during this time away.

At the end of every entry, I signed it, “With a full and grateful heart, Frank.” At first, it was a response to the deep sense of gratitude and humility I felt for this time – gratitude to you, the church; gratitude to the Lilly Endowment, for the financial means to have this experience; gratitude to my family, for being a part of my journey. But as the sabbatical continued, week after week, I realized a deeper meaning was embedded in those six simple words. It was an overwhelming sense of thankfulness to God: for claiming me as his own; for blessing me with a life of discipleship; for surrounding me with people who love me; and for calling me to be an empty vessel, filled with his Spirit, to aid in accomplishing his will.

That gratitude encompassed everything I did in renewal. When Debbie and I rested and drank in the natural beauty of Hawaii, it was with a full and grateful heart. When I could be an active stay-at-home dad, it was with a full and grateful heart. When I struggled and got frustrated through a three-week bathroom renovation, it was with a full and grateful heart. When we could witness the awe and appreciation in

our girls when they saw Scotland for the first time, it was with a full and grateful heart. When I received the call that my grandmother had died, on the day when our travel to Scotland was delayed from Indianapolis, and I knew we would not be able to attend her funeral, it was with a full and grateful heart.

If you have lost the ability to view life with gratitude to God, it is time for some perspective. Not everyone can have a four-month sabbatical – I totally understand that. But each of us has the ability to stop, evaluate, and decide for ourselves what is important, what is not important, and what needs to change so that our priorities are in-line with God's priorities for our life. How each of us does that depends on each person, and those are ideas we can continue to have conversations about in the weeks and months to come.

But I would argue that when we view our lives with gratitude, then we more clearly see God's kingdom breaking forth. When we have a perspective that is broader and outward-looking, then we as individuals strengthen the vision and perspective of the community of faith, the church. When we decide that we will be active participants in God's kingdom, and not passive complainers of what is happening to us, then we fulfill our mutual calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.

What a gift we have all received from a generous and loving God. May we all respond with a full and grateful heart.

"Let all with ears listen . . ." Thanks be to God. Amen.