

*The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost*  
*July 24, 2011*

***“His Treasured Possession”***

*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field (Matthew 13:44).*

We are instinctively self-centered beings. Author, Walker Percy describes this tendency in a book called “Lost in the Cosmos” where he writes:

“You may not believe in astrology (but imagine) you open your newspaper to the astrology column... You are an Aries (so you) read an analysis of the Aries personality. It says, among other things: *You have the knack of creating an atmosphere of thought and movement, unhampered by petty jealousies. But you have the tendency to scatter your talents to the four winds.* Hm, you say, quite true. I’m like that. Suddenly you realize that you’ve made a mistake. You’ve read the Gemini column. So you go back to Aries (and read): *Nothing hurts you more than to be unjustly mistreated or suspected. But you have a way about you, a gift for seeing things through, despite all obstacles and distractions. You also have a desperate need to be liked. So you have been wounded more often than you will admit.* Hm, you say quite true. I’m like that.”<sup>1</sup>

Whether you can relate to this or not, Percy’s example reveals a telling truth about human nature. We experience life by placing ourselves at the center of the story, even when the story has nothing to do with us. When you walk by a store window you’re drawn to look at your own reflection. When you look at a group picture you’re in, you’re always compelled to find yourself first. Even with Scripture, we often interpret what we read with these same self-centered, egocentric eyes. And when we do this, we often miss the true meaning and message that God has for us.

Today’s text once again opens with Jesus saying to his disciples, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” It’s a phrase we’ve heard a lot as we’ve moved through Matthew’s Gospel and, as I said two weeks ago when I preached on the Parable of the Sower, this phrase, “The Kingdom of heaven is like...” is designed to help us understand the parable that follows as a picture describing God’s action in the world. It’s a God-centered, Christocentric introduction telling us that what is about to happen is about God’s work, not ours.

So Jesus begins the parable with this phrase, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” He then goes on to tell the simple story of a man who finds a treasure buried in a field, then in a joy that is almost uncontainable, the man goes and sells everything he has so that he can buy the field, securing the treasure as his own.

Now usually, when we hear a parable, we automatically start to assign meaning to the different elements of the story as they relate to us. In other words, we interpret the parable from a self-centered perspective, and so, for many of us, (and in many of the commentaries I looked at as I studied this parable) our egocentric interpretation of this parable goes something like this: *We* are the man at the center of the story; we are the one doing the work. The treasure is God or faith or Christ Himself, and once we have made this incredible discovery – once we “find” the treasure – we should

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<sup>1</sup> Percy, Walker. *Lost in the Cosmos*. The Noonday Press: New York. 1983. p. 6.

quickly get rid of all the things in our lives that are not faith strengthening and give up everything so that we can fully embrace the new spiritual treasure we have found.

Now you may have come up with a completely different meaning for this story, but I think it's fair to say that this basic understanding is the natural way we interpret the parable. But there's a huge problem with this application and when we place ourselves at the center of the story we miss the truth that Jesus is teaching here. You see, according to Scripture, *we don't find* God. In fact, if we examine God's Word carefully, we quickly see that not only do we *not* find God, we *can't* find God. In a day when the Christian church in America uses the term "seeker" like it is common Biblical language, we need to be clear about God's picture of our ability to find Him. The apostle Paul tells us, "the sinful mind is hostile to God" (8:7). The prophet Isaiah writes, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (53:6). And in the book of Romans we are told that, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God" (Romans 3:10-11). The Bible couldn't put it more plainly; finding God is not something *we* do. Blaise Pascal once wrote, "It is vain, O men, that you seek within yourselves the cure for your miseries. All your insight only leads you to the knowledge that it is not in yourselves that you will discover the true and the good."

We may be seekers, but our seeking has nothing to do with God. We spend our lives seeking out ways to satisfy our own desires. We look for things that meet our needs and we search for experiences that make us comfortable. Whether it has to do with our schedules or our checkbooks, our talents or our temperament, we seek pleasure over pain, and we choose to satisfy ourselves rather than serve others. The truth is that seeking spiritual treasure never comes naturally to us, and even Christians can quickly turn from a life of humility grounded in grace and become like the prideful Pharisees that Jesus vehemently condemned.

It's not a pretty picture, and yet the message of this parable is that, through the fog of our sin, God seeks us out. Again and again He comes to us, cutting through the hardness of our selfish hearts, smashing the walls of sin that we have built to keep Him out and He finds us! He sees us through the lens of His Son Who suffered for our misdeeds, Who died for our transgressions, Who redeemed us from the curse of sin, and in Christ, when God looks at us and He sees treasure.

My friends, in this parable Jesus tells us that, "*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field (Matthew 13:44).*" As uncomfortable as it may sound to our self-centered ears, God is the man in the parable. And as unfathomable and unbelievable as it may seem to us, that is how God feels about His creation. His love for us is this great, that He would "in His joy" give everything, sending to earth His one and only Son to buy us back, to redeem us from sin and death and hell. This is the love that God has for us! This is the love that God has for you!

Today's parable proclaims to us that it is God who seeks, it is God who chooses, it is God who has set us apart to be His people, and in today's reading from Deuteronomy we are told why: "The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession...not because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you" (Deuteronomy 6:7-8). And because of His love for you have been set apart, you have been made holy, and you have been found; not because you deserved it, earned it or even asked for it; you have been found because of God's love for you, and in today's lesson from Romans, Paul us that there is nothing... nothing... absolutely

nothing that can separate you from this fierce, relentless, agape love. And this assurance leads us to joy that the world can never understand.

Last week, two of our members went to be with the Lord. Both had gone through great physical struggle, involving acute medical attention and many sleepless nights for the family members providing care. In such a dire and difficult situation, you might expect these families to be bitter and without hope. Yet for these families walking through “the valley of the shadow of death” there was a sense of joy and even anticipation knowing that their loved ones were treasured possessions in the hands of a loving God. Their focus was not on lives that were ending but on the promises of God that even though our sins deserve death and hell, Christ has given all so that we can live with God in heaven forever. And there is nothing more joyful than this amazing truth!

That is what it means to be found by God. That is what it means to be His treasured possession. It means that we can face the difficulties of this world and even the reality of sickness and death, knowing that “neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39). This Christ-centered truth is a message worth rejoicing over, and this story of hidden treasure is a message worth sharing. Amen.

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