



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094
(920)261-2570
www.goodshepherdwi.org

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST July 27, 2014

“Whatever It Takes”

(Matthew 13:44-46)

Rev. David K. Groth

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then, in his joy, he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, 46 who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." Matthew 13:44-46

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, give us an increase of faith, hope, and love, that, receiving what You have promised, we may love what You have commanded; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Earlier this year the newspapers reported that a scrap metal dealer purchased a three inch decorative egg at a flea market. He was interested in the gold content of the egg. He paid \$14,000 for it, but was later disappointed to learn the weight of the gold within the egg was not worth \$14,000.

Wanting to cut his losses and recover at least a portion of his investment, he turned to an appraiser and learned he was actually in possession of a Faberge egg that was made for Empress Maria, wife of Czar Alexander III. What this means is the scrap metal dealer has an egg that is still not worth \$14,000 dollars. It's worth 33 million.

He bought it at a flea market in the Midwest. In other words, he bought it at a place within a day's drive of Watertown! If only you had known, right? If only you had known when and where the flea market would be, and which vendor was selling that egg, you would have done whatever was required to make sure you were at the right time and the right place with cash in hand. You would not have let that opportunity slip away.

Now think about it from the perspective of that flea market vendor who sold the thing for \$14,000. That's the other side of the story, isn't it? How do you think he feels about it? He let \$33 million dollars slip out of his hands. The egg was in his possession, but because he didn't appreciate its value, he lost it, basically gave the thing away when compared to its actual worth.

Our Gospel lesson is about realizing the value of the treasure we have. It's a parable about priorities. It's a parable about not letting the treasure slip from your possession simply because you don't know its actual worth. It's a parable about the kingdom of heaven, and doing whatever it takes to acquire it and keep it.

In ancient times, there were no banks or safe deposit boxes. Houses could only be made minimally secure. So the usual way to keep gold or silver or gemstones was simply to hide it. Bury it somewhere when no one was looking. But sometimes individuals wouldn't tell anyone where they buried it and would die unexpectedly. Or they would bury their treasure before going off to war, and would never come back. Or they would in their old age, forget where they buried the treasure. They are still being unearthed today.

In our parable a man is working in a field and with his shovel or hoe he bumps into something hard. Uncovering it, he discovers it is a treasure. Immediately, he buries it again, buying himself time to gather the resources to purchase the field. And that's the point of the parable: He does whatever it takes to secure the treasure. He lets no comparatively paltry treasures get in the way of the great treasure.

Jesus goes on to tell a second parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls." Pearls were highly valued in the ancient world, even more than gold. There were no counterfeits. If you saw a pearl earring or a necklace of pearls, it was the real deal. One day this pearl merchant comes across a pearl that nearly knocks his socks off. Pearls are his life. He's seen a lot of them, but nothing like this one. It is off the charts in terms of luster, color, size and shape. The merchant cannot let this one slip away. Throwing usual caution to the wind he sells everything he has, including, presumably his inventory of other pearls because they're cheap and inferior when compared to this one great pearl. Again, it's a man who does whatever it takes. This is no superficial commitment he's making. He unloads *everything* to secure this *one thing*.

So what is Jesus saying to us with these parables? What we are all looking for, whether we know it or not . . . what we most want is the kingdom of heaven. And that priceless treasure exists for us and

was made accessible to us. The question is, are we willing to do whatever it takes to attain and secure this treasure? Nothing should be allowed to stand in the way of obtaining it. My guess is if we really appreciated the value of the kingdom of God, our lives would look very different than they do now. Our church would look very different too . . . and our school. Come what may, no cost, no price is too great for us to pay to have the treasure that is found in Jesus.

What I see through the lens of this parable are a lot of people who are slapdash and careless with the treasure that is in their possession. They are at risk of letting it slip through their fingers. And of course, the stakes are a lot higher than just losing a Faberge egg worth 33 million. That's a lot of money, but it's still a finite number. The kingdom of heaven, on the other hand, is of infinite value. How can you put a price tag on a place of eternal life, joyous life, no sickness or death, no sin, no strife or division, no tears – just music, light, color, best of meats, finest of wines and joyous fellowship with all the company of saints and angels, and with Him, our Creator and Redeemer. We toss the word priceless around but the kingdom of heaven is truly priceless. The book of Revelation tries to convey that when it speaks of the streets of heaven being paved over with gold, and the walls made of precious gems. If we only appreciated its worth, we would do whatever was required to attain it, secure it and keep it safe. But what I see in this culture and even in this church are many people who are at great risk of giving up the treasure, selling it for a pittance, even forgetting they have it. They don't appreciate the value, and so securing and keeping it seems like an inconvenience, a bother, a duty.

These past weeks Islamist militants have taken over much of Northern Iraq, including the ancient city of Mosul. Mosul is home of some of Christianity's oldest churches, many of which have recently been looted and destroyed. Mosul has also been home to a

Christian community living there since the first century. To identify Christian homes and businesses, Islamists spray-painted them with the letter “N” in Arabic, which stands for Nasrani, or Christian. Last week, ISIS, the Islamist State of Iraq and Syria, gave those Christians in Mosul an ultimatum. Convert to Islam, leave, or die. The vast majority have chosen to leave and are giving up their property, possessions, and income. What’s worse, at the check points leading out of the city, departing Christian families have been abused, cursed, and robbed. They’ve lost everything.

As a footnote, can you imagine the uproar if a fundamentalist Christian sect took over Madison and began a systematic purge of Muslims living there? Can you imagine if their mosques were destroyed, their Korans burned, their homes and businesses spray painted with “M” for Muslim? It’s unthinkable. The whole country would be furious. My question is where is the outrage in the Muslim world for what’s happening in Mosul? Not all Muslims are extremists, but all Muslims do have an obligation to denounce and resist extremism in the name of Allah. Too few imams are speaking up against it. Moreover, where is the outrage among our secular elites in the Western world?

In any event, those Iraqi Christians understand the value of the treasure they have. It would be easy enough for them to convert to Islam. Just show up at the mosque and renounce their Christian faith and confess Allah. Done. Instead, they are doing whatever it takes to keep that treasure, and they put us to shame. I fear in comparison we’ve grown soft and indifferent. We don’t know the value of what we have. If we did we would bear whatever costs and inconveniences gladly, willingly, readily.

In our text, neither the farmer nor the pearl merchant was casual or indifferent about the treasure. Neither one of them was going to let it slip away. Both decided there was nothing more important. Both did whatever they had to do, because all other treasures

looked like cheap trinkets in comparison. It reminds me of what Paul wrote to the Philippians, “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.” It reminds me of what Jesus said to Martha: “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.” “*One thing is necessary.*” It also reminds me also of Romans 8, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth even comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

Yet so many in our country are walking away from the great treasure even as they chase after what are, in comparison, cheap trinkets and trash. That’s why, I think, Jesus closes out this sermon with yet a third parable, the parable of the net. It’s very different from the first two, but very much related. What happens to those who reject Christ in search of other treasures? Listen carefully to the answer of Jesus.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” That one is hard to miss, isn’t it? Those who prove not to be genuine disciples of Jesus will have no part in the kingdom of heaven.

With these parables, Jesus is only asking you to value him as he values you. That’s all. He’s not being unfair or unreasonable. You are precious in his sight. You are like a treasure to him. That is the miracle of grace. He places higher value on you than you place on yourself. Again, he treasures you. He counts you worthy even of his life. He’s the one who redeemed you, purchased and won you, not with gold or silver but with his precious blood. He’s the one who ultimately gave it

all away in order to acquire and secure you. Jesus holds up these two men in the parables for doing whatever it takes to secure the treasure or the pearl. But in the end, he's the one who already did whatever was required to secure you and me.

“At the close of the age”, Jesus says, “the angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous.” We don't need to fear that day, for we have already been covered over with Christ's own righteousness through baptism into Christ. We will be judged not according to our sin, but according to Christ's righteousness. So we don't need to fear the Last Day. We can look forward to it with our confidence in him.

In the parables Jesus held up two men for us as examples for doing whatever it takes to secure the treasure. In the end, however, the cross tells us it is Jesus who has already done whatever it takes. All praise be to him! Amen.

