

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Matthew 13:44-46

Sermon Title: "More Than I've Ever Wanted" (The Kingdom of God – Community Renewal Services)

First Baptist Church, Morrow, GA

May 1, 2011

Both of these parables from Jesus have always fascinated me. They fascinate me, because they are so incredibly ridiculous. The scenarios that Jesus sets up when talking about the cost of discipleship are so unbelievably far-fetched that a person has got to read them and say, "No, really? You are kidding, Jesus, right? Please tell me you are kidding." Jesus was not kidding.

Jesus first tells the story of a man, a common, ordinary man just like you and me. Jesus doesn't say he is rich or has a great intellect or has many business and/or political connections. He seems to be one of us. And one day he happens across this field. Maybe he has come across it many times, as he goes for his early morning walks. Maybe he is going from one town to another, because people did a lot of walking back in Jesus' day, and just happened across this patch of land one fateful day. Maybe the Holy Spirit directed him toward this patch of land in the effort to change the man's life.

However he comes across the land, he comes across it, and he see a treasure in it that he has never seen before. The treasure is gorgeous. It is spectacular. It is larger than anything he has seen in his whole life. It is like Indiana Jones finally discovering the hidden location of the Ark of the Covenant. It is like a little baby saying mommy or daddy for the first time, and his parents exploding with laughter and cheers at the saying of the new words, and the baby's face lighting up like a bulb, and giggling until he cannot breathe.

The man is overjoyed, Jesus tells us. His eyes are wide open with excitement. He can hardly breathe, and his heart is beating a mile a second. He must have this treasure; but in order to do this, he has to find out if anybody owns the field. Somebody does, but Jesus doesn't tell us who the owner is. Somebody has claim over the field and its great treasure, but the man doesn't care. He must have both to satisfy his craving.

Now, we might think it is a silly thing for a person to become so enamored with a field and treasure that he would want to buy it. Can the field produce a crop, if the man is a farmer? Is the land suitable to build a house on it? Is the neighborhood good for bringing up a family? What are the neighbors like? We ask some

of these questions, when buying a house. We pay people to inspect the house and property, and then we get our realtor to make an offer that works with our budget. Whether this man uses a realtor or not, his ultimate goal is to possess the property for its treasure. And then this is where the incredibly ridiculous part comes in.

Jesus tells us that the man wants to possess the property and treasure at all costs, so he sells everything, *everything*, he owns in order to possess them. He breaks open the piggybank and empties all his pockets, but it is not enough to buy the field. He goes to the bank and withdraws a few hundred dollars, and it still isn't enough. The field costs more. So the man closes all his accounts from the bank, and he sells all his stocks: his mutual funds, his retirement funds, his bonds and treasury notes. If the man is married, his wife says to him, "But what about money for food? We need to eat, you know." The man tells her to collect food stamps and to visit the food pantry downtown for the food they need.

He still doesn't have enough to buy the land, so he cancels his cable service, his cell phone account, his Internet access, his utilities, even his mortgage. He probably sells the house at any price he can get. This man turns everything into liquid cash, and asks the owner of the field if it is enough. The owner finally

says Yes, it is enough. The man is overjoyed to know that he did it. He now has the field and its wonderful treasure, and it was worth going through all he did to get it.

Do we get what it going on? When Jesus says the man sells everything, Jesus means everything. All the money he earns from the job, and anything he can cancel or sell to gain more money, is completely sunk into this field he has got to have.

The same thing happens to a merchant who comes across a beautiful pearl. Jesus seems to say that this merchant is an expert in pearls, so he knows what he is looking for. He has discovered some beauties along the way, and has either kept them for himself or sold them to others at a higher price. One day he finds the ultimate pearl. The size is perfect. The shape is perfect. The color is perfect. Like the man finding a treasure in a field, this merchant must have this one pearl. It is way too expensive for him to have, so he decides to sell all the pearls he has collected over the years. He sells his business, his main source of income. He too gets rid of all his investments and retirement plans, and he gathers all the cash he can assemble in order to purchase one thing. This story might be more ridiculous than the last story, because we might not understand the appeal of oyster pearls.

We might find a nice one in a jewelry store, but we definitely are not going to sell our houses and cut our utilities and cell phones off in order to purchase one. But this merchant does just that because, like the man who now owns the field, this one pearl means the world to him.

“This is the kingdom of God,” Jesus says: “You have to give up everything for it.” You have to be willing to take up the offer that God gives. God doesn’t want a part of us or the majority of us. God wants all of us: everything we own, everything we plan, everything we think and do, and everything we are. This is the kingdom of God, and if we want to have the kingdom then we have to do what God requests. There is no other way around it.

So a rich young man comes up to Jesus and say, “I have kept all the commandments of God from the time I knew those commandments.” Jesus says, “Good for you. But if you want eternal life with God, you have to sell whatever you own – absolutely *all of it* – and give the money to the poor. Then you will have the kingdom of God.”¹ The rich man doesn’t take the risk, because there is a risk in having God’s kingdom over any kingdom we can set up for ourselves. The rich man walks away because he thought he did everything

¹ Cf. Mark 10:17-22.

he needed to get God's kingdom. He had one thing to do: completely give up himself as the center of his universe. Completely give up all the land and wealth he accumulated for his own comfort, and grab hold of God as his only Comfort.

There was another time, when Jesus is talking to the crowds, he asks them to follow him. One person says, "I'd like to, but first let me bury my father who just passed away." Jesus replies, "Let the dead bury the dead, but you go out and preach the kingdom of God."² This might not be how we would have responded to the man – it sounds rude and unfeeling – but Jesus saw something in him that caused him to say what he did. The man wanted to follow Jesus on his own terms. "Wait until my father is buried, and then I will follow you. Oh, wait, I need to bury my mother, and then I will follow. But wait, what about my wife and my children, and my pet dog, and my, and my..." One delay only gives birth to more delays, Jesus was saying to the man, and then the opportunity is missed. The kingdom of God is to be taken here and now – the Lord would have it no other way. Let nothing distract; let nothing delay. The men who sold everything for the treasure and the pearl never stopped their quests to possess them, until

² Luke 9:59-60.

those treasures were in hand.

There was another time, when a man said to Jesus, "I will follow you, but first I must bid farewell to my family at home." Jesus responded by saying, "Nobody, having put a hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."³ Once you say you are going to follow me, Jesus said, then follow me. Again, no delays.

I understand what Jesus is saying here about the plowing and looking back perfectly. My main form of exercise is swimming. All year long I swim either at the Aquatic Center next to the Courthouse on Tara Boulevard, or at our association's swimming pool when it opens for the summer. I do a fair number of laps in the water, and I cannot stop swimming until the laps are finished. I don't like to be bugged; I don't like anybody trying to stop me in the middle of my laps. This is simply because it is too difficult to continue swimming once my rhythm has been broken. One day at the Aquatic Center, the lifeguard interrupted me after my 12th lap, and asked me to move from one lane to another. I was not happy. It took me several minute to get back into the pool and swim again, and the whole time my mind was preoccupied with how rude that lifeguard was to

³ Luke 9:61-62.

interrupt me. I didn't feel I had to go swim that day.

Maybe this is what Jesus was also saying to the man who wanted to wave goodbye to his family. Once you set your mind to having the kingdom of God, do not stop. Do not stop the momentum, or you will fall away, and so will the kingdom of God. When a team is winning the game, they do not want to stop the momentum that is helping them to win. The other team will do everything to hinder their progress: call many timeouts, hold the ball a little longer than normal, and have longer conversations with the coach. The winning team has to keep the momentum going without reducing speed, or they will lose their rhythm and possibly lose the game.

The man who found the field never stopped the momentum of having it. When his wife said, "But we need that money for food," the man said, "I need it for this field, and once we have it it will supply all our needs." When the children said, "But we don't have videogames to play," the man said, "I have come across a treasure that will make you forget about videogames." When the merchant's business was starting to decline, because he was not spending the money he saved for purchasing more products to sell, he concluded, "But once I have that one pearl, I will have everything I need. Let the business fall apart, if I can replace it for this one spectacular pearl." {PARA}

We cannot let the momentum slow us down, as we pursue the kingdom of God. We cannot let anything distract us – no sin, no alternative ideas and philosophies, no better plans – from having what God is freely offering to us. God’s kingdom means the world to us. It is our ultimate goal, the prize we work toward every single day of our lives.

Such commitment to Jesus Christ is not a blind pursuit. It is not a stupid idea as some people might think it is. It is a joy to give up everything for Christ. To the person who gives up everything for Christ, it isn’t a “must,” an obligation, they must do. In other words, they don’t hear these words, “You *must* give up your possessions for Christ. You *must* give up your plans and dreams for Christ.” The person who gives himself or herself over to Christ never does it, because it is a “must.” He or she does because it is a pleasure. It is a thrill to have Christ. It is a thrill to be a part of God’s kingdom right now, and to imagine what it will be like when he finally enter it completely, with all its glory, with all its peace and perfection.

We don’t look back. We don’t want to be where we once were, before we found God’s kingdom. The man who found the field never wanted to go back to that moment when he didn’t have the field. The merchant never wanted to go back to the time when he only had mediocre pearls in his shop.

Right here, right now. Serving and worshipping and growing in faith and growing in spirit. We do it all every day, until the day the kingdom of God is firmly in our grasp.

The Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the good news! Who is in the position to condemn us? Only Jesus Christ is, and he died for us. Christ rose for us. Christ reigns in power for us. Christ intercedes for us. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life has gone; a new life has begun. Friends, believe the gospel: in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Amen.

