

Buried Treasure

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Theologian, Susan Andrews writes: It was one of those moments of clarity when I knew I wanted my life to change. I was in my late twenties, and I was involved in a process of vocational testing. Taking a Rorschach test was part of the deal, so I was sitting in a psychologist's office looking at a succession of inkblots printed on small, white cards. For those of you who have taken one of these tests you know that what the client is supposed to do is take each inkblot, look at it, and then tell the psychologist what it is you see – the first image that emerges in your mind's eye. I dutifully responded to about 25 inkblots.

When I had completed the exercise, the woman who was testing me paused, and just stared. Then she said, "You are the first person whom I have ever tested, who took the cards and held them exactly as I handed them to you. Not once did you turn the card upside down or sideways. Not once did you experiment with various angles or possibilities." She hesitated, but then continued, "Do you think this is the way you approach life? Taking each day as it is handed to you, accepting all the shoulds and oughts and the right way to do things? Perhaps you might want to start excising your freedom and your imagination. Then you might find new angles for interpreting your world."

Those words had a strong effect on Susan, and since that day she has been trying – with various degrees of success to walk through that door and explore the world in new ways with all its angles and possibilities.

Every act of faith is an act of imagination – a mind/heart interpretation of the world – not as it is handed to you, but from the angle of how God sees it. The theological word for this experience is revelation, but the process, I believe, is imagination. There are Native Americans who call this 'looking twice at the world.

This morning Jesus is inviting us to use our imagination – to look twice – in order to recognize God’s presence in our lives. There is no other way for people of fact to become people of faith. Our Gospel Lesson includes five parables about the kingdom of heaven. Now kingdom living is the central teaching of Jesus in three of the four gospels. It is important to know that the kingdom of heaven, or kingdom of God, does not refer to life after death. It is, instead, Jesus’ way of talking about life in the here and now, life lived in the present reality of the sacred. This is life lived “**as if**” – *as if* God was already fully in charge of the world, *as if* sin and death and darkness were gone from the face of the earth.

At this point in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is speaking not to the world, but instead to the disciples, to the church, to us. Because we are, through the power of the Spirit, the resurrected Body of Christ in the world, Jesus calls us to be “as if” people – the kingdom people – the ones living as if God’s wholeness and truth and justice are already realized.

The disciples back then had as much trouble as we in hearing and seeing what Jesus was talking about. So, Jesus speaks the language of imagination. He speaks in parables: image stories that invite us to look twice, to see the holy in the human, the miraculous in the mundane, the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Jesus talks about seeds, and fishing nets, weeds and pearls. He takes his listeners to the kitchen and to the garden, to the wheat field and to the seashore. There, in the most ordinary places of their lives, he shows them God. He invites them, and he invites us, to find buried treasure in the fields of our own living.

Some years ago, as Nancy and I were shopping in a quaint old shop on Chicago’s north side, I spotted a painting of an old pioneer Thanksgiving dinner. I told Nancy I really want to buy that picture. Nancy said, “We already have that picture. It’s in the storage space in the basement.” I had no idea that I already owned what I desired. So often we look desperately for God, only to discover that God has always been present in our own life’s experiences.

Jesus tells us today that kingdom of God is like – it is as if – we dug in a field, found a buried treasure, and then turned over everything of value in order to acquire that field and own that treasure. Since fields were often the banks of Jesus' day, the safety deposit boxes where people hid their most valuable possessions, Jesus was using images that spoke to the tangible details of people's lives. He was telling them and us that we find God, the buried treasure of wholeness and goodness and truth, right in the fields of our daily living – right in the places where we keep our most valuable possessions.

Bible interpreter, John Sanford, goes as far as to suggest that we find the buried treasure inside our own souls, that where we meet God most intimately is in the rich soil of our own hearts.

Most of us, aware of our own weaknesses and faults, will react with self-deprecating resistance when it is suggested that WE are the buried treasure, WE are the pearl of great price that gives expression to the kingdom. But very often in the history of Christianity, the theologians have dwelt upon the unworthiness of human beings, our proneness to sin, our worthlessness in contrast to God's supreme goodness. There is none of this in the teachings of Jesus. Matthew Fox echoes this understanding of the value and goodness of humanity when he suggests that if there is an original sin, it is to believe that we are defined by original sin rather than by the original blessing of our birth.

Today Jesus makes it very clear that we are the family treasure buried within the fields of the world. We are the pearl of great price that gives symbolic expressions to the kingdom of God. But the kingdom is not just an individual reality. Ultimately, it is the transformation of all creation into the very image and power of God. That happens only when we are willing to turn all of who we are, and all of what we have, and all of God that we possess – turn it all into resources for the continuing work of creation – the work of giving birth to God's reign in all corners and among all the people of the world. That is why images of treasures and pearls are so intertwined with images of mustard seeds and yeast in the Gospel reading. The kingdom is not only hidden in the ordinary stuff of

life. The kingdom is also at work permeating and growing in inevitable ways. The kingdom is not only in us, it also grows through us, if we trust God enough to fill us and use us.

The image is particularly powerful as Matthew describes it. The amount of flour that the woman in the kitchen is kneading is enormous – enough to make over 100 loaves of bread!! Though the yeast is imperceptible at first, mixed invisibly into mounds of flour, the insignificant suddenly becomes significant, bubbling and fermenting and expanding – turning flat, passive grain into fat, fresh, life-filled bread.

We not only can make a difference; we must make a difference in order for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. With a little bit of courage and a lot of imagination, "looking twice" at the world around us – we can find God in the midst of our very ordinary lives. That is basically, I believe what God is asking the whole Christian Church on earth to do: Look for God and what God is already up to in our everyday lives. "Take courage," God says, "because I am with you, and then trust that with my help you can change the world." Then we can mix that holy presence into the stuff of which this world is made, watching as the living Spirit of God leavens the loaf and becomes the bread of abundant life. Today this is the good news of the Gospel.

Amen!