The Kingdom is Near: Disturbing Treasure

Good morning. I want to begin this morning with a question: how many people that are here today love reading books? Any book lovers in the congregation? Now, are there any people here who enjoy *listening* to books read to them, maybe by a parent or a spouse or a friend or on an audiobook? Children, do you like having stories read to you before bed? I like books too. Here's another question: if you were to walk into the library or a bookstore and look for a book, would you walk to the "fiction" section or the "non-fiction" section – those who would go to "fiction" raise their hands and those who would tend to go to "non-fiction" raise their hands. I confess, I tend towards non-fiction books but over the years I have been trying harder to read more fiction books, largely because a well-written story really can teach us *a lot* about ourselves and about our world. In fact, I have long thought that the label "fiction" is a misleading name for good stories because good stories really *are* about real life and can teach us a lot about our world and about how to live in our world, can't they?

I think this is why Jesus often told his disciples stories, because stories have a way of drawing us in, drawing us into the setting, the characters, the plotlines, the surprises and twists and turns. Stories also have a way of making us sympathize with certain characters, which sometimes can make us feel quite good (especially if we sympathize with who we think is the protagonist or the hero of the story) or sometimes they can make us feel a bit convicted (especially if we come to realize that we might be more like the villain of the story). Jesus, of course, didn't write long, elaborate, and complicated literature – in fact he didn't *write* stories at all, rather he *spoke* short, provocative stories to his disciples while they traveled around the countryside announcing that the Kingdom was near. For the last couple of Sunday's, we've been reviewing some of these stories that were passed down to us in the Gospel of Matthew. Who can

remember what some of these stories were about? Yes! The story of the two builders and the story of the mustard seed and the yeast. I don't know about you, but what I find immediately compelling about these "short stories by Jesus"[1] is that they are so down to earth. They are set in familiar locations such as a construction site or a farmer's field or a kitchen, they include common items like wood, rock, sand, seeds, and flour; and they include regular people going about their various professions as builders, farmers, and bakers. Jesus' other parables in Matthew are similarly set in familiar locations with familiar people, as well as some common and some less common items: merchants with fine jewelry in the marketplace, fishers with nets by the seaside, laborers tending grapevines in a vineyard, and bridesmaids at a wedding celebration with oil lamps. Jesus' short parables set us right smack-dab in the middle of the lives of people.

But if that's all-Jesus' stories did, his parables wouldn't be all that evocative or compelling. Like a good storyteller, Jesus knows that his hearers can't just have their own world and their own understandings of that world reflected back to them in his stories, rather, his stories have to surprise his hearers and help them see their world with new eyes, to encounter the unexpected, and even to be at times a bit shocked or offended. In her excellent book, *Short Stories by Jesus*, Jewish scholar of the New Testament Amy-Jill Levine notes that one of the problems with our modern interpretations of Jesus' parables is that we have "domesticated" them, making them into stories we think we already know the moral of and so can largely dispense with once done with the formality of the story itself. Imagine picking up a new novel at the library—a bestseller—and taking it home and putting it on your coffee table and then instead of reading it, picking up your phone or tablet, going online to a book reviewers' website, and

[1] This is the title of Amy-Jill Levine's book *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. For what follows in this sermon, I owe a lot of my inspiration to Levine's analysis. See especially her chapter on "The Pearl of Great Price," in *Short Stories by Jesus*, pp. 139-164.

reading *their summary* of the plot and their interpretation of the meaning of the story before returning the book to the library. Would that be a good way to read a book? No! It completely side-steps the whole journey of entering a story, getting to know the characters, and most importantly, receiving the full impact of the story as it connects with your unique story and identity. This shortcut, soundbite, summary approach to stories, Levine suggests, is unfortunately exactly how we've come to approach Jesus' short stories. And us preachers have a share of the blame for this. Sermons on Jesus' parables risk foreclosing their power if care is not taken to invite the hearers to listen closely, and most importantly to open their hearts, ears, and eyes to what Jesus is saying in them.

As a community of interpreters, what we need to foster is the willingness to ask more questions of Jesus' parables and especially foster a capacity to be surprised and yes, *even disturbed* by Jesus' stories. And so, perhaps now, before I move us into some reflection on two feature parables for today—the parable of the treasure hidden in a field and the parable of the merchant in search of fine pearls—we might pause and pray that God might open our hearts so that we might understand, our ears that we may hear, and our eyes that we might see. I invite you to repeat this prayer after me and if you like you can also follow me with some actions. So, together, with hands on our hearts we say:

"Lord, open our hearts so that we might understand"

And with our hands on our ears we say:

"Lord, open our ears that we may hear."

And with our hands on our eyes we say:

"Lord, open our eyes that we may see." Amen.

Jesus says: To what can the Kingdom of God be compared:

> **Matthew 13:44** [44] "The kingdom of heaven 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. (X2)

Who among us here hasn't dreamed of finding treasure at some point in their lives! As a child, I used to have a metal detector, and I could often be found outside around our house with it, looking for treasure. Most often I would find nothing of great interest – perhaps an old nail or screw, occasionally a penny, perhaps. But there was always great excitement every time that metal detector beeped loudly and the prospect of finding hidden treasure was there. There is something so alluring and attractive about treasure, especially as a child. But why is treasure so *alluring*? Why does it feature so highly in children's books and movies? What is it about it? There is, of course, an exotic element to the idea of treasure – perhaps its unique history, its link, perhaps to ages long ago, and so we think of treasures like pirate gold or ancient relics like the Holy Grail. Beyond that, though, there is the obvious economic attractiveness to treasure: treasure could make you rich and, as adults may be prone to think about when imagining a winning lottery ticket, treasure promises to solve those pesky financial problems or open the possibility of acquiring all those *special things* we've long desired! In a time of rising inflation and interest rates, a chance discovery of treasure in a field might also *sound* quite appealing. But don't all jump up out of your seats to go search Snyder's Flats just yet, for as Jesus' first disciples soon learned from him, there is more to treasure than meets the eye, more to consider about it than its alluring quality or its economic benefits.

I imagine Jesus' original hearers, many of them probably economically low on the socio-economic ladder, would have immediately resonated with the parable of the hidden treasure on a literal level – maybe some of them could have imagined the joy of unexpectedly finding treasure in a field and selling what little they had to buy the field (assuming they could afford even that)

and so finally find economic stability. If there were any well to-do disciples hearing Jesus' words, they might also identify with the investment savvy person who sold all they had to buy the field with the treasure in it, thinking that the returns must have been much greater than the investment to justify selling all his goods. But I also wonder if any of Jesus' disciples asked him follow-up questions[2] like: "How much treasure did this person find?" "What it really worth selling all he had?" "What did the person do with the treasure after the fact?" "And hey, did anybody else notice that all this talk of treasure must somehow be related to Jesus' sermon on the mount? Remember, how he said:

> **Matthew 6:19-21** [19] "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; [20] but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven…"

While one interpretive tendency when reading this parable might be to zero in on the chance discovery of the treasure and so a focus on the acquisition of a great amount of wealth, Jesus' previous words about not storing up treasures on earth would likely have led the disciples to wrestle with the more disturbing element of the parable: the person's *joyous* divestment of everything they had in order to buy the field. Jesus' parable doesn't make clear what kind of return this person will get from this treasure, but what we do know is that its discovery elicited a counter-intuitive reaction: joy that led to giving up all their possessions.

The very notion that someone could joyfully perform such a radical act is a particularly challenging one for an acquisition hungry society like ours, where *joy*, we are told, is precisely to be found in acquiring more things, or at the very least, ensuring what we have is secured and protected. Ironically, because we are told we always need the latest and greatest things, however,

[2] Further questions also present themselves: "Whose field was it in the first place?" "Was the buyer being sneaky and potentially even dishonest about the purchase given that they knew that the field contained treasure?" "What would the owner of the field have thought had they known the treasure was there?"

we often struggle to even find *joy* in the products we have. What then ends up masquerading as joy is just the fickle thrill that we get in being part of the process of acquisition itself. Amy-Jill Levine suggests that Jesus' parable of the treasure in the field would have led his followers to ask important questions like: "What do we value?" "Are those things we value worth valuing?" And "if we were to discover something of even greater value, what would we be willing to give up to attain it?"[3] While we might be tempted to domesticate Jesus' parable about the treasure in the field by rushing to the punchline and emphasizing the great value of the kingdom of heaven above all else, we do well to sit with the *concrete challenge* this parable issues to disciples of Jesus. The "kingdom treasure" Jesus describes would have disturbed his hearers, in that acquiring the treasure of the kingdom came at a cost: they could no longer exist in a system based on grasping after more and more. Jesus really was trying to ask his disciples to fundamentally re-consider what is truly valuable, even to the point of divesting from what they had to invest in something more important.

Such a re-valuing did not come easy back then and neither does it come easy for us today, for often our whole identities are wrapped up in whatever it is that we have chosen to value. Divesting from that which is of less value in the kingdom of heaven, then, often can mean embracing a new understanding of ourselves. This becomes clear in the second parable we are looking at today, the parable of the merchant in search of fine pearls. Jesus said:

> **Matthew 13:45-46** [45] "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; [46] on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. (X2)

Here Levine again provides a wonderful analysis of this parable. She notes, first of all, that Jesus' hearers would have been initially put off by the comparison of the Kingdom with a merchant in

[3] These are questions that Levine's chapter so helpfully uses to get at the heart of these parables. Cf. *Short Stories by Jesus*, P.164.

search of anything. Merchants, in Jesus' day, had a poor reputation and this merchant is searching for fine pearls on top of it all, which could suggest they were a wealthy dealer trying to get even richer. But what happens in the parable with this "socially suspect" merchant?[4] The merchant is in search of fine pearls, but finds *one* pearl, just one, of great value, sells all that he has, and buys it. Levine notes that this phrase "all that he had" (which appears in this parable and the previous parable) is not just talking about financial assets, he didn't just sell his stock of pearls or drain his bank account so that he could refill it later by selling this new pearl of great value. No, this merchant literally sold all that he had all that was necessary for his subsistence. Again, the economic element is central in Jesus' parable, and again we have an instance where Jesus' disciples might have been faced with any number of questions: "on top of being of ill-repute, isn't this merchant now also the village fool? Getting rid of absolutely everything to buy one pearl seems like a pretty poor investment, Jesus. Couldn't he have been more effective if he had simply continued his profession while making a few tweaks here and there? Are you sure you want us to follow his lead, Jesus?"

A plain reading of these parables suggests that Jesus really did ask his disciples to follow this merchant's lead, he really did expect some of them to embrace kingdom change through radical divestment from the world's systems. This is a hard one for us to grapple with, I think. Many or perhaps most of us don't hear that radical call and that's ok – not all of us have been called to take up a vow of poverty or itinerant living. As I've pointed out in previous sermons before, the early Jesus community included both those who followed Jesus through such radical divestment and those who used their continued participation in the socio-economic structure of the world to support those who no longer participated in it.[5] But, as I said in my six-word sermon

[4] Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 143.
[5] Levine labels these two options "itinerants" and "householders." Cf. Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, p.162.

from a few weeks ago, no matter what calling you take up in this world and no matter what life stage you find yourself in, embracing the kingdom change that Jesus brings near will always involve basic spiritual and practical acts of renunciation, acts of "leaving" behind or a giving up the world that you once knew in order to embrace a new, coming world. These two parables ask us further to continually consider the shape of that renunciation in our own lives – what is God calling us to re-prioritize, what is God calling us to give up, and what new form of living must we take on in place of the old.

Commenting further on the character of the merchant, Levine points out the kind of renunciation present in his story. I quote:

> Whether what he [the merchant] does is risky or wise, foolhardy or dedicated, he has gained a pearl of enormous value. In the gaining, he has not only fulfilled a desire he did not know he had; he has also changed his identity. He had been looking for fine pearls, but he buys only one. By finding that pearl of ultimate worth, the merchant stops being a merchant. Thus he redefines himself, and we must see him anew as well.[6]

In renouncing "all that he had" to purchase the pearl, the merchant also renounces his identity as "merchant." He has, as Levine puts it, "removed himself from the realm of buying and selling, seeking and finding, wanting and wanting more."[7] And yet, renouncing his identity, the one previously known as a merchant now takes on a new identity, becoming, as Levine puts it, "the man who possesses the magnificent pearl."[8]

The disturbing focus Jesus gives to renunciation in these parables about treasure disturb today as they disturbed in the first century. They present us with, among other matters, that thorny question of whether Jesus called people to *really* give up all they had and follow him and what to do with that given that most of us are not inclined to actually choose that level of

[6] Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 152.
[7] Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 161.
[8] Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 161.

renunciation for ourselves. But at the same time, even if we come to terms with the fact that we are not called to become itinerants for the kingdom, these parables continue to provoke. For those of us that continue to work with and trade in the treasures of the world are no less challenged by Jesus' Kingdom call to re-evaluate what is of most value, to revisit our priorities, and to be willing to become new people, as we discover in greater measure the kingdom of God emerging near us and indeed through us.

In just a moment, we will sing our hymn of response, which is a Taizé song whose lyrics come directly from **Romans 14:17**. The lyrics say:

> "The kingdom of God is justice and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Come Lord, and open in us, the gates of your kingdom."

As we take these parables about treasure with us today and as we consider what is of greatest value in our lives in the days to come, here is a challenge I encourage us to take up: May we let this song be our prayer and each time we pray it or sing it throughout our day, may we be open to the discovery of Kingdom treasures that both disturb us and bring us unexpected joy.

AMEN.