

"FOR THOSE STILL SEARCHING"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

As I mentioned last Sunday, my father was a minister back in the days when ministers lived in parsonages and all parsonages were marvelous large houses. Churches built parsonages to house the minister with the largest possible family, so they always had a lot of bedroom space. I remember one house that we lived in in Albany that had five bedrooms which was more than adequate for our family of four.

There was a bedroom on an upper floor that was unoccupied. It was a large fine room with a beautiful view of Clinton Avenue. My parents used it as a guest room. I had no passport to enter that room. If I ever entered it I was first to have permission of a higher authority in the family and under no condition was I ever to touch anything. It was a special room reserved for the occasional guest who might visit. It was also a special room to me because as I remember it, it contained an opening to a crawl space under the eaves of the roof. I never had the courage to open that door that went in that direction because the word was that a mortician had once lived in that house at some time and you know what he kept in there. So we wouldn't open it.

I must have been about eight or nine at the time and I was reading adventure stories, the kind that boys read about pirates who scrawl a map on a fragment of paper and leave it under a rock. You come along and find it. It reads, "Go to the bend of the river and find the big oak tree and walk six paces East". The place where the treasure is buried is always marked with a big "X". So in my imagination I just assumed that there was a hidden treasure in that crawl space of that large house. Somebody should investigate. My sense of adventure was being nourished daily by the radio heroes of those years - Jack Armstrong, Tom Mix, and the Lone Ranger - even Little Orphan Annie (with a decoder). One day I got the courage to open it, with a friend standing by to be of assistance. The friend expected a ghost and I expected a hidden treasure. There was nothing there, which enabled all in the house to sleep a little more soundly. But it was a terrible disappointment to me. And I suppose all the rest of my life I have been searching for hidden treasures - both in people and in places.

KINGDOM PARABLES

Now look to the lessons that were read for you this morning. They're about a treasure, too - only they're different. They're not stories about searching for a treasure, but rather stories about stumbling upon a treasure.

The first of the two parables from Matthew is about a pearl merchant who came across the Pearl of Great Price - the most valuable pearl in the whole world. There it is - right on the tray. He notices it; it's there with all of the others. He never thought that he would be so lucky as to ever come across that pearl. The poor bloke selling the pearl doesn't realize the value of what he's selling, but the buyer, the merchant does. So he mortgages all that he has to buy that pearl of great price. The point of the parable is that he wasn't expecting to find it. He never thought that he would find it. Oh, he knew it existed, but he always thought that this kind of thing happened to other people - not to him! There it is, right there in front of him. And so he seizes it.

The other parable is the parable of the man plowing the field. One day his plow scrapes on something metallic. He drops to his knees, wondering if maybe it could be true. He can't believe because these things don't happen to him. They happen to other people. He digs with his hands, pulls the dirt away, and

sees the box - the treasure. It's been there all the time. He just didn't know it. If he had only known. Here he was, a sharecropper all of these years and there was a treasure under his feet.

These are Kingdom parables, and they're told to teach us something about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is the way God created us to live. And Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like that. It's here...right where you are. The message of the parables is: you're living with a treasure and you don't know it!

OLD TESTAMENT TEXT The Old Testament text is from I Samuel, the story of Saul, the first King of Israel and how he became king. But what it's really about is how God works in this world to bring us to the fulfillment of our lives.

The story begins with the familiar formula of all hero stories,

"Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; from his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people."

That's the way all hero stories begin. But the rest of the story is told in such a way as to illustrate that Saul did not become king because he was tall and handsome; he became king because God arranged things so that he could become king.

It's a marvelous story. Saul's father's name is Kish, and some of Kish's asses are missing. Now who do you send to fetch asses? Obviously you send a servant, or somebody of lower status in this life. You don't send the future king of Israel. This is a humble job. Not only a humble job, but a frustrating job. They couldn't find the asses in Ephraim. They passed through Shalishah and then to Shalishah, and then through Benjamin's country and finally ended up in the land of Zuph. There they were ready to give up when they heard there was a man in that land by the name of Samuel - a seer. They heard that he could tell them where the asses were. Now it just so happened, day before, the Lord spoke to Samuel and said, "Samuel, the next man who comes into your house, I want you to anoint him King of Israel."

And that's the way it happened. Looking for his father's asses, he stumbled on a kingdom. God arranges things in this life so that even though you are frustrated, even though you are in some humble status in this life, even though your dreams for your life are not being fulfilled, He is still at work to bring you to the fulfillment of the life that he has in mind for you. We need to remember that.

And, of course, the other Biblical heroes have exactly the same story. For instance, Joseph, the younger brother, the least expected to succeed. He was such an obnoxious brat that his brothers sold him as a slave into Egypt. And there in Egypt he rose to prominence and became the Prime Minister of the greatest nation of his time.

And David, the youngest of the eight sons of Jesse and therefore the least likely candidate to be chosen for anything. So when the representative comes looking for a new king, they look at all the other sons of Jesse, but not David. He's too unlikely. Yet David is the one who is chosen to succeed the aged Saul.

The point is that in any moment, in unexpected ways, life may open its kingdom for you. At any moment you could be surprised by grace. At any moment, God can touch your life - through a friend, or through a deed, or through a word, or even through some tragedy that comes to all of us sometime or other. What a shame if you miss it.

THE TREASURE IS WHERE YOU ARE RIGHT NOW

So I want to underscore two things from these lessons that will help us.

And the first is that the treasure is where you are right now.

Now we don't expect it to be there. We don't really believe that it's there, nobody does. We are all raised to believe that treasures are buried in far away places and guarded by dragons, so we've got to make some heroic effort to get there. We've got to get out of the place where we are now and get to some new place. We've got to get the right information. We've got to know somebody. We've got to have a secret.

But that's not true - not according to the Bible. You don't have to go searching for the meaning of your life, because God has already found you. That's the message of the Bible. So the Kingdom that you are looking for is here, right now. It's there, but you can't see it. And you probably can't see it because you don't really believe that it is here. Not where you are now, not the kind of life that you have to live now. It can't be here. Or you don't think you're worthy of it, or you don't think you've suffered enough in this life to deserve it, or you don't think you've worked hard enough. But it's there. You don't have to go searching for it, because God has already found you.

Our Jewish friends have a tradition of stories called the Haggadah, stories that are based on the message of the Bible. They're not Biblical stories but are legends based on the message of the Bible. One of my favorites is about a man who left his village weary of the life he was living there, looking for a new place where he could put behind him all the troubles he had encountered in life. What he was looking for, in other words, was a treasure, a kingdom.

He walked all day and at dark he found himself in a forest and decided to camp for the night. He took out the crust of bread that he had brought, gave thanks and ate it. Then just before going to sleep he placed his shoes in the center of the road, pointing in the direction in which he would continue the next day. And while he was asleep another man came along that road, a practical joker, if you will. He took the shoes and turned them around in the direction from which he had come.

The next morning the man woke up and gave his thanks to the Lord of the Universe, slipped into his shoes and started in the direction in which they were pointing. Again, he walked all day, and toward evening he saw the heavenly city on the horizon, the kingdom that he was looking for, searching for - the treasure he hoped to find. It wasn't as large as he expected it to be. In fact, the closer he got to it, the more familiar it looked to him. But he pressed on until he found a street much like his own, knocked on a familiar door and greeted a family that he found there, and lived happily ever after.

There's a treasure right where you are. You don't have to go searching for it, because God has already found you.

GIVEN AS A GIFT

The second bit of advice is this. It will be given to you as a gift. That's the meaning of all those Biblical stories about stumbling upon treasures and kingdoms. It's always a surprise, and there's a reason for this. Jesus said if you try to hold on to your life, you're going to lose it - but if you give your life for my sake and for the Gospels, you'll find it. That is, if you give yourself to something bigger than yourself, then you will find happiness. If you think only of yourself, you'll be miserable.

I came across an interesting confirmation of this recently. Daniel Yankelovich has published a book called, New Rules in American Life: The Search for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down. In the book he chronicles the search for fulfillment that has gone on for 20 years now in our culture, a movement that has emphasized thinking primarily of yourself, convinced that that's the way to find happiness. It was based on the idea that we have certain needs as human beings that must be satisfied, and we will not be fulfilled as human beings until those needs are met. Which is true.

But - Yankelovich says - what happened was that needs were confused with desires. Everybody was satisfying their desires and justifying it on the basis of fulfilling needs. He told of a woman who went to a psychiatrist and was relieved when the psychiatrist assured her that she didn't have to satisfy every desire she had. She could say "no" to an urge now and then and not get warts. Yankelovich said that the era of looking after you own desires is now passing, and the era of the "ETHIC OF COMMITMENT" is now emerging. The duty to self is being replaced by the duty to something beyond the self as a way of finding happiness.

Well, that's the wisdom of the Bible. Give yourself and you will find yourself. You're saved - not by your efforts - but you are saved by God's grace. You don't have to seek the treasure anymore, because God has already found you.

What happens when you think only of yourself is that you become self-conscious. And when you're self-conscious, you get nervous. You always wonder how you're doing and what other people are thinking of you and if you're going to make it. You can't see anything else but yourself when you're like that. So when you stumble on something you worry that it's made you look foolish. You dust yourself off and hurry on and hope that nobody saw you. You may have stumbled on a treasure, but you can't see it if you are conscious only of yourself. That's why if you can forget yourself you may discover a treasure. If you lose your life you may have it given back to you renewed - as a gift.

CLOSING

There are different ways to illustrate this, but I want to close by touching briefly on the wedding ceremony, because I think the wording in the ceremony is applicable not just to marriage, but all areas of life.

The minister says to the couple, "I require and charge you both...that if these vows are kept inviolate" - that is, if you give yourself to something beyond yourself, if you make a commitment, if you give yourself to some other persons, "then God will bless your marriage, and grant you fulfillment in it...and establish your home in peace." That's the message of the Bible. Live a committed life and you will stumble on to something else. God will bless your endeavor, grant you fulfillment in it and establish your life "in peace." And what a treasure that is!

A little girl was sitting with her mother near the front of the Church at a recent wedding. She turned to her mother and asked, "Mother...what are they doing?" And the mother replied, "Right now, dear, they're saying their vows". And the little girl said, "I can say my vows. AEIO and U".

If you know your vows - not only in marriage - but if you know your vows to Christ, if you know the vows that you have made to live "beyond yourself", then you can be sure of this - you're on the way to a surprise, to real treasure, and to the finding of a Kingdom.

LET US PRAY Help us, O God, always to remember, through the example of Jesus Christ, that what we keep we lose, and that only what we give remains our own. Lead us, Lord, out of our little lives into the greater world of service and understanding and enjoyment. May we never be satisfied with ourselves, and always reach for the treasures that are beyond our grasp.

In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen