

I Want That!

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St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

"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. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.¹"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Dr. Harold John Ockenga was the president of the seminary which I call my alma mater, and he was an amazing man. Along with being a scholar and pastor of a very prominent Boston Church, he also founded and led two seminaries, Fuller Seminary in California and Gordon-Conwell in Massachusetts. Not only was he an accomplished man, but "Doc Ock" as he was affectionately known, was a very distinguished looking man of genuine dignity. Though advanced in years, he still cut an impressive figure in his woolen pinstripe suits, rimless glasses, and in cooler weather, a fedora hat. He was the very picture of the dignified pastor, scholar and leader, and this noble pillar of the Church caused quite a stir one day when his chapel address included a startling bit of personal testimony. He told of the first time that he saw his wife, Audrey. I believe it was in a restaurant where he was seated, and seeing his young and lovely wife-to-be appear he was startled by her beauty and told the students that he then

prayed in his heart, "God, I will do anything for you if you will give me that woman!" The student body was dumbstruck by this confession as they doubted that men of his age and dignity had, or ever had, such passionate desires. I suppose that it is also important that I explain a thing or two. Harold and Audrey Ockenga had a long and happy marriage, and for any feminist who may fear that his prayer was for a woman to own and dominate, your fear is unfounded. Audrey was an artist and free spirit, and their marriage was one of mutual respect for each other's gifts and callings.

The doctor's testimony that forty some years ago caused a real stir, and I suppose it would be little different today. Passion and strong desire are matters which make us uncomfortable, and the reasons for this are not difficult to discern. Lust and obsession lead in dangerous directions. And yet God wants us to be a people of desire! Remember the Great Commandment of the Jews which Jesus frequently affirmed: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all of your soul....*" In the Book of Revelation Jesus dictates a letter to the Church at Ephesus and calls them to a renewed passion: *But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.* (Revelation 2:4-5) God wants us to be a people of deep desire, and the parables we will be celebrating today, of the treasure and the pearl, are stories of desire, passion and even obsession. And if you are feeling a little less than passionate at the moment, do not fear, for we find here a key to regaining that zeal.

Do note that we are dealing with twin parables, just like the two parables which precede them. They share a common lesson, yet hold interesting differences. First is the parable of the unexpected treasure—the treasure in the field. It is a brief yet powerful lesson, taking up only one verse. *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.* This is the story of an unexpected, "accidental" find. This treasure was found by one who was not searching for it. We might call it luck or accident, but we know that with God there is no such thing. This is an illustration of the person who hears and receives the Good News of Christ and the Kingdom much by surprise. They were not looking for God, but they found God just the same! I think of the great Presbyterian pastor and evangelist D. James Kennedy. He was a young and carefree dance instructor who was awakened one morning by his radio alarm, which just happened to be broadcasting a Christian message. The message caught his interest, and before too long he was a joyous believer with a life pointing in a whole new direction. Many people come to know Christ through a great crisis in their lives. Suddenly they find themselves in need of divine help and receive the Good News of Jesus. These treasure finders are people who have been completely surprised by the Gospel, and they have a joyous story to tell.

This parable is recorded only in Matthew's Gospel, and Matthew must have made sure that this story was remembered, for it was also his story. Consider Matthew's life.

Born a Jew, he turned his back on his people by becoming a tax collector for the occupying Romans. Not only was he working for the enemy, but tax collectors were known for their dishonesty and greed. We do not know precisely how Matthew became a tax collector, but we do know that in doing so he deliberately turned his back on his people and his people's God. Matthew had sold his soul for earthly wealth. He was now a man without hope. Then came Jesus, who came to rescue the lost. Jesus looked him in the eye and offered the simple command. *Follow me.* Wisely, Matthew recognized that he was being presented a priceless treasure, and proceeded to leave all to follow Jesus. Joyfully he threw a party to thank Jesus, and to introduce Jesus to his friend. The treasure in the field is Matthew's story.

If we had met Matthew, particularly in his early days of following Jesus, I wonder if we might have been a bit put off by his zeal and joy? Treasure finders are often overflowing with excitement about God, and sad to say, Christians who are not so zealous in their faith or have simply been believers for a long time and have lost some of that joy, can feel annoyed by such emotion. We even hear Christians mocking people that they find over-zealous. This is tragic. A treasure finder may genuinely be over-zealous and even a bit obnoxious in their forceful sharing of the Good News with others, but this is an error which we should gladly overlook. In fact, we should study such exuberant believers and learn what we can from them as to how we can have some of that energy!

The following parable about the pearl is a little closer to our general experience and is the story of a treasure found after a long search. *Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.* Here our treasure is found by one who had been seeking it. This dealer in gems is presented as an ordinary broker who by the very nature of their work is always on the lookout for fine pearls. One can imagine the discovery of this perfect pearl. Perhaps it began with a startled look, and then the very deliberate though difficult work of acting unimpressed. (A buyer never wants to let their excitement for an item become apparent!) As coolly as he possibly could he tells the owner of the pearl, "Some interesting gems you have there. I must be on my way, but I may stop by tomorrow for another look." And then that dealer sold everything he had and gathered assets every way he could imagine that he could then go and buy that priceless gem!

While the treasure finder was completely surprised, the pearl merchant was overjoyed with discovery after a life of search. This dealer had studied pearls and knew all there was to know, and enough to know that this was a pearl like no other. All of one's wealth and possessions was a small price to pay and his heart resonated with a single thought: "I want that!"

Have you found that pearl? This is a parable for a person raised in the Church. This is the story of one who knows the basics of the faith but is hoping for something deeper

and fuller. A week ago, the ministry committee for the Lancaster Association was interviewing a lay person who is being called to pastoral leadership. I asked him just when it was that he received that call to special service. He told me of a life of being raised in the Church and agreeing with all the doctrines and practices of the Church, but then he told of a special awakening. Some coworkers began a lunchtime Bible study at the bank where he worked. No pastors or Ph.Ds leading the discussion, just regular kinds of believers. It was during those times of engaging the Bible with co-workers that Christ became real and the claim upon his life for service became obvious. His life became filled with a new energy and joy. He had discovered the pearl! Many of you have stories to tell of faith which boldly came alive through a certain time of discovery. Perhaps it was "*Alpha*," or the "*40 Days of Purpose*" or a week of camp at Hartman Center. Perhaps it was through a time of crisis when you came to reconsider Jesus Christ. Have you joyfully discovered the pearl?

The parables have different beginnings, but the conclusion is much the same. It ends on a note of overwhelming desire. All was sold for the sake of being a part of the Kingdom of God. Now is when we are given pause. Let us be honest among ourselves. We deeply distrust zeal, and selling all that we have is inexcusable! Imagine for a moment a new member to St. Luke's. We much need new members and there would be joy with such an addition, but suppose this was a new convert or one whose faith was radically revived and they had dozens of ideas of how to expand and improve our ministries. Suppose this person had boundless energy to go with it and continually exhorted us to be more excited about Jesus. We may come to regret such a new member, for that kind of zeal makes us most uncomfortable. True enough, there are countless stories of over-zealous Christians making all kinds of messes in their lives and in the Church. The Bible even offers a few cautions about new converts, but we must not be so overly cautious about their energy. God has called us to be a people of deep desire. Again, the words of Revelation: *But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.* God wants more passion from us!

These parables may cause us to wonder why there is not more energy in the Church. Have the treasure and the pearl faded? Indeed, they have not, but some other things have changed. If the treasure and perfect pearl do not excite us in our day, it may be that we live in the era of the well-treasured world and of cultured pearls! These stories were preached in an age and area of poverty, but we are more than wealthy by that day's standards. A perfect pearl does indeed dazzle, but we now live in a day when all kinds of lights and gems, real and artificial, shine. It would help a great deal if we would all take the time to read Ecclesiastes to hear Solomon's sobering discoveries of the ultimate emptiness of this world and its luxuries. Moses may have done great miracles before Pharaoh, but Pharaoh's magicians were able to match Moses on several of his powers. The world has a dazzle of its own which keeps growing brighter.

How shall passion be restored to Christ's Church? It will begin when we draw near and take a closer look at the treasure and the pearl. I wonder if that merchant did not have momentary regrets about his purchase. When he did, he knew just what to do. He carefully unwrapped that precious pearl and studied it once again. No flaw was found, nor will a flaw ever be found, and he would again delight that this pearl was worth every penny! Let us always be drawing near to Christ, our Priceless Treasure and Pearl of Great Price. We shall never be disappointed. Let us freely avail ourselves of every event and service which we can engage to draw us closer. That begins with the simple tasks of daily devotions and weekly worship. Give God praise. Draw near. Let us continually be God's searching people. Are you seeking? It is never too late to start.

Let us learn a lesson from Doc Ock. I remember him as an amazing man of boundless energy and vision, dignity and class. I have also learned to look a little deeper and see that what made this possible and energized it all was a heart full of passion for Christ and the Kingdom. Let us learn this easily overlooked virtue.