

Matthew 13:44-50 “Treasures in the Field”

Some of Jesus’ best lessons start out with, “The Kingdom of heaven is like ...” How do you explain something that’s unexplainable? The best you can do is by using words and images that are familiar. “The kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field which someone found, and in his joy he sells all that he has and buys that field.” That’s what it’s like for me when I get an “ah-hah” moment as far as my understanding of what God’s reign is all about. When we “get it,” we’re one step closer to understanding our identity as Christ’s followers, and when *that* happens we become like that merchant who seeks fine pearls. As Christians ... as people who are committed to be more like Jesus, we’re constantly trying to understand the core values of Jesus and adopting them as our own. We’ve been doing a lot of work over the last couple of years relating to how the church should best reflect Jesus’ values and how that relates to our ministry and mission in the world.

For quite a few years now, the church ... and I’m talking “big C” church, has earned the reputation of either being a tired old institution that doesn’t want to change, or the obnoxious kid on the playground who uses fear and intimidation to bully people into submission. The problem is our culture has, for the most part, learned to ignore or dismiss the church. Some have even learned to manipulate segments of the church in order to gain power. Neither one of those responses does much to help the church’s mission and witness. *We’re* all about proclaiming God’s reign. *We’re* the ones who should be out on the front lines *showing* people where to find this “hidden treasure” ... we’re supposed to be the merchants who are out seeking the fine pearls of wisdom to share with a world that is in desperate need of “Good News.”

So what sort of church do *we* need to be in order to help people see the great value of how the world is being reconciled to God? And when I say “the church,” I’m not talking The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ.) I’m not talking Roman Catholic, Methodist, Congregational, Pentecostal or any denominational “other.” I’m not talking liberal or

conservative or any other label that we put on churches. I'm talking about something more radical ... more subversive. I'm talking about a church that's able to share its mission work across theological and cultural differences ... that's able to see beyond denominational loyalties. What would *that* church look like?

Thank God for the Quakers. And no, I'm not lifting them up as paragons ... remember, I'm trying to get away from that, but still ... God bless the Quakers for giving us Phillip Gulley. Some of you may have heard of him. He was one the Virginia Regional Disciple Men's favorite retreat leaders. I love his "If" series. In fact, one of you has my copy of *If Grace is True*, so if you have it let me know, okay? My favorite, though, is *If the Church Were Christian*. This book lays out what I'm trying to say here this morning. In fact, everything I'm trying to say about a church that's like a treasure hidden in a field can be summed up just by lining up his chapter titles into a paragraph!

If the Church were Christian, Jesus would be a model for living, rather than an object of worship. Affirming our potential would be more important than condemning our brokenness. Reconciliation would be valued over judgement. Gracious behavior would be more important than right belief. Inviting questions would be valued more than supplying answers. Encouraging personal exploration would be more important than communal uniformity. Meeting needs would be more important than maintaining institutions. Peace would be more important than power. We would care more about the love and less about sex. This life would be more important than the afterlife.

I love it when someone comes up with the words to something that's been in my heart all along but I haven't been able to find the words! What would it look like for people in the "big C" Church to be like this? What would be the consequences? Would we have to give up our individual identities completely? Would we have to stop being Methodists, or Presbyterians, or Baptists, or Disciples to live like this?

Or could we keep that identity but just not allow those identities to hold us apart from one another? Will we have to pretend to believe things we don't believe? Will we be expected to speak in tongues like the charismatic traditions? Will others have to take communion every week like us or baptize their folks by immersion?

Let's just take that first description and run with it ... especially since this was one of the first questions that got put in the Big God Question Box. "If the Church were Christian, Jesus would be a model for living rather than an object of worship." If this were the case, think about all the church fights that would just *end*. Period. Oh sure, we may still have a few spats about what color to paint the bathrooms, but I guess that fits more under the category "meeting needs would be more important than maintaining institutions." I'm talking about the 2,000 years of theological arguments that center on how much of Jesus was God and how much of Jesus was human, and what does it mean that Jesus is "one with the Father" and how we can engineer the perfect creed that spells this out so that we can figure out who is "in" and who is "out." Who is orthodox and who is apostate. Who is going to heaven and who is going to hell. *That's* what I'm talking about. What about the *virtues* to which he calls us? And if Jesus is a means to an end and not an end unto himself, then shouldn't the proper *object* of our worship be *God*?! And what better way to *worship* God than to *follow Jesus*?

So let's say an evangelical, ultra-conservative, charismatic church who uses *drums* in worship (what!?) opens a shelter for battered women and invites others to join them in volunteering for cleaning up or providing financial support or meals or child care or something like that? And you've got another church down the road that doesn't believe in speaking in tongues, or doesn't like their style of worship, or doesn't agree with their theology. You know ... a church that thinks the charismatic church is as weird as the charismatics thinks *they* are weird because of *their* worship and theology? What in the world is there to stop these churches from becoming partners? Well, one of the things that might come up is the different ways in which each church

understands the root causes of abuse. Or maybe there might be some different understanding when you start talking about the need for conversion to Christianity to receive help. What if ... *what if* ... you could just let those things go. What should stop two churches from agreeing to perform acts of simple human compassion? It's what Jesus would have done. How many people did Jesus heal or help where he required them to recite the sinner's prayer? Or how many people did he say, "Okay, I'll heal you, but you've got to accept me as your personal Lord and savior first." Well I guarantee you he didn't do that because the phrase "personal Lord and savior" does not exist *anywhere* in the Bible! Sure he told the woman caught in adultery "go and sin no more," but it wasn't a prerequisite for receiving help. When we model the way of Jesus, we don't need to argue with others over formulas for salvation. Given the desperate needs around us every day, why can't we just "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" with those who are different than us?

Back in the second century, there was this huge epidemic that hit the Mediterranean world. It was known as The Plague of Galen. Thousands of people died to the point where corpses were filling the streets. And the Christians ... the followers of Jesus were doing what Jesus would have done. They were tending to the sick even though it was a big risk to their health. They didn't fear death, so they remained in the cities that others fled. They tended to everyone who was sick regardless of race, class, tribe or religion. During that time a church leader named Chrysostom put it simply: "This is the rule of most perfect Christianity, its most exact definition, its highest point, namely, the seeking of the common good ... for nothing can so make a person an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighbors."

This is what the reign of God is all about. It's like a treasure in the field. It's like a pearl of great price. Except instead of gold or silver or gemstones or old coins or anything else you'd find in a treasure box that would set you for life financially, the treasure that we find in God's reign is the value of knowing that the followers of Christ not only have

each other's backs, but have the backs of *anyone* in need. And the treasure isn't way out there beyond our reach ... it's there in the field in front of us. It might take some time to dig through it, but with enough people, and enough faith it *can* be found.