

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Today's Gospel lesson delivers three parables for the price of one. This is quite a bargain price! To get caught up, parables are stories comparing the kingdom of heaven to common things on earth. Parables are intended to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom to believers, but hide them from unbelievers, making the hearer dependent on Jesus.

Over the past couple weeks, we have heard Jesus speak parables about seeds and soils, wheat and weeds. To those parables, the disciples needed further explanation of what those stories meant. So, Jesus revealed the meaning. Today, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to buried treasure, a pearl-seeking merchant, and as a dragnet trolling the waters. But to this three-in-one parable spectacular, Jesus asks His disciples, "***Have you understood all these things?***" To that, they reply, "***Yes.***"

But did the disciples truly understand? Do you understand? Remember, Jesus explained the Parable of the Sower. He explained the Parable of the Weeds. But Jesus never explains the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, the Parable of the Pearl of Great Value, and the Parable of the Net. He only asked His disciples, "***Do you understand?***"

I don't know if they truly understood. Maybe they did? Or could they just not want another explanation. We do not know. But due to the non-explanation, today's parables come with some questions. What does it all mean?

First, the Parable of the Hidden Treasure. Jesus says, "***The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field***" (Matthew 13:44).

So, the kingdom of heaven is hidden from plain sight like a buried treasure. People have walked right over it, picnicked on it, or planted grain on it for years, not knowing that treasure was buried right beneath.

Since Christ never explained this parable, a couple interpretations have been taught on its meaning.

First, for centuries, the consensus of the early church and medieval church was that Jesus is the treasure hidden in the field. So, it is up to us to sell our possessions and follow Him. You may be very familiar with that interpretation. It's a discipleship reading. It's about giving up everything for Jesus, which shows our complete trust in Him.

But what about this other interpretation. What if the treasure is not Jesus, but you and me? What if Jesus is the one who finds us – the hidden treasure?

Now, we don't deserve to be regarded as treasure. We don't deserve to be called treasure at all, since we are poor, miserable sinners who fail to trust in God and His promises. Instead, we like to trust in other created beings who make promises that they are unable to fulfill. But despite our sin of lack of trust, Jesus does call you His treasure. He calls you treasure, because of His grace toward sinners. Jesus found you and He rejoiced! So, in His joy, He sold everything He had. In 1 Corinthians 6(:20), the Apostle Paul was inspired to write, ***“You were bought with a price.”***

You see, Christ paid the purchase price for the whole field. He purchased us all. He emptied Himself and became obedient to death even death on the cross. He redeemed the field for you!

But which interpretation is right? Could they both be right?

Jesus continues, ***“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it”*** (Matthew 13:45-46).

So, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking pearls. Imagine a Middle Eastern pearl dealer working the vendors in the jewelry market. He bargains, he wheels, he deals, looking for the best pearl at the best price. But then he finds the one, the pearl of pearls, the rarest and finest that ever popped from an oyster, and for the sheer joy of owning it, he literally sells everything he has.

Like the hidden treasure, one of the interpretations of this parable was that Jesus is the pearl and we are the merchant. But what if it is actually the other way? What if you are the pearl and Jesus is the merchant? It's not hard to see that. Remember John 3:16? ***“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son”***?

Look at it this way: Jesus looked for you intently like a merchant who knew what He wanted. And when He found you, you were like a fine pearl to Him. Yes, you. You with your sin stained all over you. Yes, you. That's called grace. Then Jesus spent it all on you. He died to give you eternal life.

So, the kingdom of heaven is like the seeking love of God, who searches high and low for that one pearl of infinite value, the apple of His eye, the world He created and loves, and, finding it, gives everything He has, His only-begotten Son, in order to make it His treasured possession.

We think we can bargain with God. We think we're the shrewd merchant who works through the pearls of the religious jewelry market and having found Jesus, gives up everything to own Him. Don't you want to be the hero of these parables? But do you really want to give up everything to follow Jesus? Recall that rich ruler in Luke 18, when he was given that prospect, what did he do? He turned around and went home with a long face. Now, we can't scoff at that rich ruler since we'd likely do the same.

Thankfully, the kingdom of heaven isn't up to us. The kingdom of heaven is about God seeking us and God saving us. The kingdom of God is about the love of God in Christ Jesus that stops at nothing to rescue us – and the entire world – from sin and death. It's about the God who works hiddenly and mysteriously, in, with, and under the things of this world to redeem the world. The kingdom of God is about your value – *as His hidden treasure and His fine pearl*.

Never forget, you are precious to God. You are worthy of His only Son, His shed blood, His innocent suffering, and death. That's what He paid to redeem you, to make you His own, so that you might live under Him in His kingdom.

Now, what about the third parable? Jesus says, ***“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind”*** (Matthew 13:47).

Well, this one is the easiest of today's trifecta. The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea. This dragnet is big – it's huge – it's wide, and it hauls in everything. I mean everything. It hauls in good fish, bad fish, old tires, shoes, hubcaps, those plastic rings that go on our sixpacks of pop and beer. It hauls in the entire world in all its goodness and badness and ugliness. No one and nothing is outside the dragnet of Jesus' death and resurrection. He died for everyone. He rose for everyone. This is known as universal grace, since Christ embraces all in His death.

Now, if it was up to us, we may have wanted to be more selective when it comes to salvation. Why not fish with a fishing pole? Why a net? Shouldn't salvation only be for the good? Well, God's ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts.

Instead of being selective, God drags the whole world into one dark death on a cross and then out of that death raises up a new creation. Then and only then can good and evil be properly sorted.

But what about this sorting? ***“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 fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”*** (Matthew 13:49-50).

Well, there are only two destinations. You are either numbered among the righteous or you are numbered among the evil. As sinner-saints, the line separating the evil and the righteous runs right through each of us. We ought to be deeply grateful knowing that the net drags in everybody, because if God only picked up what was good, we would be left out, due to our sin.

But God doesn't do that. Again, He hauls in everybody. In fact, we are still in the process of being caught. He is growing us up into Him through His Word and Sacraments in repentance and faith. So, while we were still dead in our sin, He rescued us. He pulled us in.

Now, for those who are continually opposed to God, they will receive their just reward. By denying Christ, they are choosing to separate themselves from God. But Jesus came to save them too. They were in this dragnet, but they chose to have nothing to do with God, so they will receive the same judgment as Satan in the fiery furnace of hell. But for us, who are in Christ, this dragnet is comforting. He chose you! He chooses everyone! The only ones who are not saved are those who continually deny Christ.

Until Christ returns, everyone is in this dragnet, since we are all of great value to God. We are His priceless, hidden treasure. We are His priceless, precious pearl. We are all gathered into His net.

You may not always feel like you have great value. You may feel like you are insignificant. But you are priceless to God. He died for you. God purchased you when you were against Him. He saved you before you got the notion of being saved. He rescued you before you even called for help. He purchased you. He redeemed you while you were still dead in your trespasses and sins.

Even if Christ didn't explain these parables, we do know one thing for certain: we are His treasured possession, since Jesus died for you, so that you could experience the kingdom of heaven and all by grace through faith in Him. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

**+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +**