

“Seeking God Anew”

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Text: Matthew 13:44 – 46, Matthew 7: 7- 11

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Over the past month and a half the common lectionary has guided us to reflect on stories of Jesus, several of which included what are called “the hard sayings.” “The first shall be last.” Generosity in the story of the widow’s mites. To consider our answers to Jesus’ question “who do you say I am?” and the implications our answers should have in our lives. These teachings of Jesus have been challenging... challenging to all Christians because they call us to consider going deeper in our relationship with God and our practice of faith. These stories of Jesus remind us that our discipleship is to be an ever changing thing. So how do we go about doing that? Now, Presbyterians are keen on the idea that faith comes to us as a gift. You can’t win it or earn it – it comes to us through God’s grace. But that gift doesn’t come fully formed. We have to nourish it and nurture it, in partnership with the Holy Spirit. Doing that is a choice, and it is a choice we will make when we believe that our connection with God is important. When we take it as important enough, then we will choose to search out God and work at how we live in the ways Jesus called us to live.

A few weeks ago we read in chapter one of Mark Jesus first, simple summary of his essential message: “The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and accept this good news!” The kingdom of God has come near and this reality is good news. So how do we get a better understanding of this good news? How can we see more clearly this kingdom? That’s the focus of Jesus’ teaching this morning. “The Kingdom of God is like a treasure”. He told two parables – allegories – one where the treasure was hidden in a field, and another in which treasure was an incomparable pearl of great value. In both stories, the finders recognized immediately what they had in their hands, so they went right off, sold all they owned that they could acquire the treasure. Now, when we hear these stories, I think the first thing that grabs us is the cost. Both these people went out and sold everything to get the treasure or the pearl. And when we think about really making a disciplined practice of being a Christian, I think this is what nags at us. “How much time will this take?” “What effort will I have to make?” And I think these are the questions that linger when we hear the hard sayings of Jesus.

But neither of the people in the parables appear to be concerned about the cost. In fact, we read that the person in the field went out and sold everything “joyously”. Both these people knew what they had found. The implication of the analogy is pretty clear: the cost of discipleship pales in comparison to the

treasure you gain by growing more and more into God. But the clear point is this: each of us has to discover, time and time again, in newer and deeper ways, that what God offers to us IS a treasure. Until we appreciate this, we will always be hesitant to take our discipleship one step further on the path towards Jesus. But, if we see it as invaluable, what would hold us back? Becoming treasure hunters begins with knowing that the gift of faith is a treasure.

A man decided to go ice fishing, which takes quite a bit of preparation to organize all the gear you need to be warm, comfortable, dry and successful. As he got himself ready he had one beer.... and then a second.... which made him feel so fine that he had a third. By then he figured he had consumed enough anti-freeze that he was ready to go. He headed off down to the ice, laid out his gear and pulled out his big ice auger. Just as he was about to cut into the ice, he heard a voice say, "There's no fish under that ice". He looked around for the speaker, but could see no one. And yet he took the advise, gathered up his gear and moved to a different spot. Then, just as he was about to cut into the ice he again heard the voice, "there's no fish under that ice". Shocked and unnerved by this, he could only come to one conclusion. "Lord, is that you?" "No", the voice replied, "it's the arena manager".

To find what you are looking for, you first have to look in the right place. This is Jesus' point about the pearl merchant. Here was a man who was in the business of looking for fine pearls, as much as we as Christians are in the business of looking for God. Knowledge and experience helped him know what to look for and what to focus on. He made it his practice to look for fine pearls. So when he found that pearl of great price, he knew exactly what he had. We talk often in the church about drawing close to God, or knowing God. For some it seems like second nature. But many are not quite certain they've ever sensed God.... or, if they have, it's been pretty infrequent.... or the experience was not as moving as they would have hoped. The story of the pearl merchant is Jesus' encouragement to actively seek out God. Like the pearl merchant it means developing a practice of looking for God, giving time to being aware of God's presence. Seeking God is a practice, a habit. Joining in worship. Spending time with scripture, Reading a devotional book about faith. Spending time in prayer. All these things make us treasure hunters. Now, will every time you worship, or pray, or open the Bible bring God to you? Everyone's different. But it is like treasure hunting: as we practice these simple, common ways of faith, we are putting ourselves in a place where we might glimpse the treasure – where we might see God. Not every pearl for the merchant held the promise and value of the one he gave everything for. Even so, he was always looking.

Which is why Jesus also told the story about the guy in the field. He just happened to stumble upon that treasure. This reminds us that God doesn't wait around for us to start our devotional time or for Sunday morning. We can find the treasure of seeing God's kingdom working its way out in our world at the most unexpected time and places. If God is here around us, we should expect to see the work of His hand. This means we should be watchful, because we could trip over it at any time.

About ten years ago I met a woman named Jane who was dying of cancer. God and faith had never been that important to her. Yet, after a visit from her brother, she had an unexpected, powerful sense that God was with her in her illness. It was startling for her, unexpected, yet it was an experience which brought immense peace as she faced the end of her life. After that event one friend of Jane called to ask if I would visit her. She had lots of questions! While it was heartbreaking for me to watch the cancer slowly rob her of life, I marveled at her faith experience. To see her excitement about discovering God for the first time reminded me again of how exciting God can really be, and should be, to any of us. For Jane that experience was an unexpected tripping over the treasure.

But, when treasure hunting, we still need more than watching eyes and open hearts. On one summer vacation with the family I panned for gold in a long trough full of sand and water. You could try your luck and learn an old skill. While it was a simple skill, I wasn't really all that hopeful I'd find anything. I dipped my pan in the sand, swirled it out in the water... nothing. I dipped again, swirled it out... nothing. After four attempts I put my pan down and walked off, finished... until I heard a voice behind me say, "Ladies and gentlemen, if you would please step back, I'd like to add some gold to the trough." Well! So I went back and tried again, with a greater sense of expectation. With every scoop I anticipated finding my nugget. And when I didn't find it, I tried again, because I knew there was treasure in that sand. On about my eighth try I found one. It was a little fleck of gold half the size of a pinhead. I did not retire.

Anticipation sharpens our expectation that we might catch a glimpse of God. Without anticipation we may just miss God's presence and grow complacent in faith. So, a few questions to think about. Do you anticipate God's presence here now in worship? Do you anticipate insight when you read scripture? Do you anticipate God's touch and peace when you pray? We can be expectant, because the pay dirt of experiencing God is there. The treasure is there and God wants you to find it. God wants this relationship with us so much that God doesn't sit around idly waiting for us to stumble over the treasure. In the reformed faith tradition we believe God reaches out to us even if we aren't looking for God. Think of it as God giving us hints to where the treasure's hiding. Seeking after God means developing the skill and the experience of the pearl merchant. It means being watchful for the unexpected treasure like the man crossing the field. And Jesus had this promise for us. He taught, "seek, and you shall find". Faith is a gift, and thank God for God's graciousness in giving it to us. But the treasure really does start small. There is more of it out there in God. It is but our's to find.