

## ***TREASURE HUNTERS***

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Proverbs 2:1-11; Matthew 13:44-53

***“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field...”***

Matthew 13:44

“Buried treasure.” If there are two words that have exercised a more magnetic attraction on the human spirit over the centuries, I’d be hard-pressed to identify them. The lure of buried treasure has beckoned people to visit some of the most remote, most difficult-to-access corners of the earth.

Think of the marine salvage experts, who spend millions — not to mention years out of their lives — searching for some sunken Spanish galleon whose hold is full of gold doubloons.

Or, think of the Egyptologist, patiently deciphering hieroglyphics in hopes of locating some undiscovered pharaoh’s tomb.

Or, imagine the people who sent that submersible down to the depths of the sea, so it could poke around in those darkened first-class staterooms of the sunken Titanic: looking for gold, or jewels, or God-knows-what else.

Part of the lure of treasure-hunting lies in the dream of uncovering something of great value. But there’s also an intoxicating joy in the hunt itself. We used to see treasure hunters all the time in Point Pleasant: roaming the beach with

their metal detectors, searching for watches, pocket change or whatever else might have been left behind, alongside the fallen blobs of Coppertone?

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I can recall one time in my own life when I got involved in a little treasure-hunting. I was 14 years old. My grandparents had decided to take my 12-year-old cousin Eric and me on a sightseeing trip to Alaska.

One of the stops on our package tour was a working gold mine that offered tourists the opportunity to pan for gold. Any gold we were lucky enough to find, they told us, we could keep!

They took us to an old, wooden sluice, left behind from gold-rush days. There they showed us how to pan for gold in the stream: how to fill a shallow, steel pan with gravel; then, add some water to it; then, slowly swirl it around until the water began to spill over the sides, carrying the gravel with it.

The heaviest of metals, of course, is gold — which means that, if you swirl the water around just right, the last thing left in the bottom of your pan will be something yellow that gleams.

Suddenly I heard my cousin Eric call out. He'd found something! Sure enough, it was gold! It was the tiniest of pieces, so thin it couldn't have been called a nugget — more like a little piece of gold foil. But sure enough, it was genuine

gold, our guide informed us. He took the piece and put it into a little plastic vial — a souvenir for Eric to take home.

Well, I was nearly two years older than Eric, so I figured, if he could do it, so could I. I filled up pan after pan with gravel and got the water moving around in a perfect circular motion. Each time I emptied the pan, though, there was nothing even remotely golden left in the bottom.

Finally, the tour guide handed me a pan he'd filled himself with gravel from a nearby wheelbarrow. "Try this one," he said. I took his advice, and was rewarded with my own gleaming little fleck of gold!

Well, we had maybe 15 or 20 minutes left before our tour bus left, but in that time, Eric and I were men on a mission. We'd come down with a serious case of gold fever. The two of us bent to our work, filling one pan after another with gravel and using the water to slowly wash it out over the rim of the pan. By the time the call came to board the bus and head off to our next destination, we didn't want to leave. Just one more panful, we thought to ourselves. Maybe in the next one we'd find the real nugget that would make us rich!

It was only later that someone pointed out to us that the only people who found gold that day were those who used gravel that came from that one particular wheelbarrow. The people who ran the place, had no doubt salted that gravel with

little bits of gold foil — so thin as to be of no great value, but genuine gold all the same. They made sure a few of the tourists on each bus would have the satisfaction of finding something. Eric and I being the only youngsters on our bus, they made sure we were numbered among the elect.

I can still remember, though, what that gold fever felt like: the desperate desire, the fire in the belly, to sift through just one more panful of dirt: because surely, in that one, we would strike it rich! I think Eric and I would have cheerfully allowed the bus to go off without us, marooning us in the wilds of Alaska: under the theory — that seemed perfectly reasonable at the time — that we'd be able to hire our own limousine with gold nuggets, in an hour or two.

That would not have been a very sensible plan. But that's exactly the point: just as it's Jesus' point in the parable. In the kingdom of heaven, all the conventional valuations of this world fall away. The man sold he had to buy the field. He let it all go: because only then would he have a chance at the treasure that had become his all-in-all.

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This isn't the only parable Jesus tells in our scripture reading for today. He tells two others, in rapid succession. The kingdom of heaven is like a jewel-merchant who comes upon a pearl of surpassing beauty and value. Immediately he

liquidates his entire inventory, in a once-in-a-lifetime bid to own this one pearl that's unique in all the world.

The kingdom of heaven is also like a fishnet: they cast it into the sea, where it gathers all manner of fish, both good and bad. The fisherfolk haul the net in, throw the ordinary fish back, and are left with the trophy catch.

At the center of each of these parables is a quest for something of surpassing worth: buried treasure; a whopping big pearl; a catch of championship fish. Along the way to completing this quest there are things that must be sacrificed — things that once had value, but suddenly have none. They have become expendable.

These are not parables about treasures: although in each tale there are treasures that figure prominently. These are parables about the transformation of people: the fundamental revaluation of everything in their lives, as they set off in search of something new and infinitely more valuable.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus is about the business of recruiting disciples. He's looking for people who are so captivated by the vision of God's new order breaking into this world that they're willing to let go of everything else.

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Let me tell you a story about someone like that. Her name was Dorothy Day. Dorothy grew up in Brooklyn, in a well-off Protestant, middle-class family. She

didn't connect with her Christian faith, though, until she was an adult. Dorothy had a powerful conversion experience, became a Roman Catholic, and dedicated her life to serving the poor of New York City. In the depths of the Depression, she founded the Catholic Worker House, where anyone could come for a bed and a meal and a listening ear. Even more than that, she became a social activist, agitating for a better deal for working people and the unemployed. She was so good at stirring things up, at speaking truth to power, that some called her a Communist — although, in truth, she was nothing of the sort. Dorothy was all about taking Jesus' teachings seriously: especially the ones about selling all you have and giving to the poor.

They tell a story about her that's a parable in itself. A wealthy woman came into her Catholic Worker House, and Dorothy gave her the grand tour. The visitor was mightily impressed, and at the end of the tour she took out her checkbook and made a generous donation. She started, then, to walk out, but turned around and came back. On impulse, she pulled a diamond ring off her finger, and gave it to Dorothy.

One of Dorothy's associates saw the size of that shimmering rock, and thought this was a wonderful thing. The organization was chronically short of money. She knew that ring could be sold for a tidy sum. Imagine her astonishment,

later that day, when she spied that very diamond ring sparkling on the finger of a woman from the neighborhood who had come into the Catholic Worker House for help..

Well, the staffer went up to Dorothy and asked her how that client had gotten hold of the diamond ring. “I gave it to her,” said Dorothy, matter-of-factly

“What were you thinking?” asked the staff member. “Don’t you know that, if we sold that ring, we could pay that woman’s rent for a year?”

Dorothy just looked at her for a moment. Then she said that, as far as she was concerned, the woman could do whatever she wanted with the ring. She could sell it for rent money or she could take a trip to the Bahamas. Or, she could simply enjoy wearing a diamond ring on her finger. “Do you suppose,” Dorothy asked, “that God created diamonds only for the rich?”

I think you’ll agree there’s something disturbing about this story. But that’s true of all parables. They cast us off balance. They set us to thinking about the world, and our place in it, in entirely new ways.

Dorothy’s decision to simply give the ring away makes no logical sense. By any worldly standard, her co-worker was absolutely right. The sensible thing to do was to sell the ring, and record the proceeds on the black-ink side of the balance sheet, so the organization could help even more people.

People of deep spiritual sensitivity like Dorothy Day don't always see things the way the rest of us do. Once you know there's treasure buried in the field, it's hard to assess anything else in God's creation according to the cold calculus of dollars and cents.

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Here's one more story of another treasure of great value. Maybe you saw it in the news a couple years ago. It's a remarkable news story about something very precious that was lost for 35 years, then found again.

It was a Stradivarius violin, nearly three hundred years old. It belonged to Roman Totenberg, one of the world's greatest concert violinists. Totenberg was a Polish Jew who fled to America on the eve of World War 2, at the height of his career. (You may recognize his name if you listen to NPR. His daughter, Nina Totenberg, was their long-time legal correspondent.)

Mr. Totenberg's Stradivarius was stolen in 1980, after a concert he gave at the Boston music school where he taught. The instrument was never seen again — until 2015.

A California woman contacted a violin appraiser, asking him about an old instrument her ex-husband had given her, just before his death in 2011. She'd put it away for a few years because she couldn't open the case's combination lock.

Finally, curiosity got the better of her. She broke the lock. When she opened the case, she realized what she had was no ordinary instrument.

The appraiser recognized it immediately. He alerted the authorities, who called the FBI. The woman insisted her ex-husband never told her the violin had been stolen. She surrendered the instrument, and law enforcement did not press charges against her.

The woman's late husband was a lesser-known violinist by the name of Philip Johnson. He'd been hanging around backstage on the night of the crime. Mr. Totenberg had suspected Johnson was the thief — and even told the police of his suspicions — but he never could prove it.

The instrument is worth millions. To Mr. Totenberg, it was a treasure that had no price. He told his daughters after the crime: “It's sort of like having your arm taken from you.”

It's a shame Johnson's wife didn't take it to the appraiser just a few years earlier, at the time of her ex-husband's death. Had she done that, Mr. Totenberg — who died in 2012 at the age of 101 — might have played his prized Stradivarius again.

The Totenberg daughters decided, at the time the Stradivarius was returned to them, not to sell it to a mere collector. As Nina put it: Great violins “are meant

to be played by great artists.... [It] will eventually be in the hands of another great artist, like my father, and the beautiful, brilliant and throaty voice of that violin, long stilled, will once again thrill audiences in concert halls around the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Some treasures are so valuable, they have no price.

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That’s what a good parable will do for you. It opens your eyes to spiritual treasure you’d never see otherwise. With such vision, a diamond ring on the finger of a welfare recipient is the most natural thing in the world. And a Stradivarius deserves to be owned not by the highest bidder, but by someone with the skill to make it sing.

Let us pray for such vision as that:

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Cooper, “Roman Totenberg’s Stolen Stradivarius Is Found After 35 Years,” *New York Times*, August 6, 2015.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/07/arts/music/roman-totenbergs-stolen-stradivarius-is-found-after-35-years.html>

See also Nina Totenberg, “A Rarity Reclaimed: Stolen Stradivarius Recovered After 35 Years,” *NPR.org*, August 6, 2015.

<http://www.npr.org/2015/08/06/427718240/a-rarity-reclaimed-stolen-stradivarius-recovered-after-35-years>

**Lord, be our vision.  
Be our wisdom, and our true word.  
Give us courage to discard any tawdry trinket of this world  
that distracts us  
from the true treasure to which you are leading us.  
Amen.**

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