

*Hidden treasures, or
The pedagogical garage sale*
Proper 12, Year A, July 26, 2020
Church of the Ascension, Chicago
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Jesus put before the crowds 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." Matthew 13:31-33,44-49a

I started following yard sales and garage sales and estate sales right after college, when I needed to inexpensively furnish my first apartment. Five dollars got me a brown recliner that needed a repair. I believe that I would still have that comfy recliner were it not for the fact that I got married, if you know what I mean.

Even though my wife Brooke could live without the recliner, she is now just as likely as me to pull the car over for a yard sale. We also know where to look online, and we often have, for upcoming estate sales nearby.

Those of you who are also drawn to garage or estates sales may know the simple pleasure of finding something useful—a better can opener or a shovel. Or you may find a book or a sweater that no one else could possibly want, but, as they say, it ‘speaks to you.’ And then there’s always the chance of some treasure. I’m thinking of a beautiful first edition Marc Chagall print, now hanging in the Ascension rectory stairwell. Brooke and I found it at an estate sale, in the basement, overlooked and way underpriced.

The gospel passage that we just heard consists of five very short parables, and it reads to me like what I might call a pedagogical garage sale. Jesus has laid out a curious hodgepodge of images and incidents. He is watching over them and wondering who will show up and give them a look and maybe find something of value, maybe even a treasure, to take home.

Over here we have the FREE table, and on it a mustard seed in one of those tiny ZipLoc bags, and a jar of yeast, unopened. There’s a good chance they will still be on the FREE table at the end of the day. Why would Jesus put out such ridiculously common things? And why the handwritten index cards—one by the mustard seed, the other by the yeast, each with the same short message: *the kingdom of heaven*.

Maybe Jesus has laid out these everyday items to get us thinking about all of the mundane things and moments and routines that take up most of our lives. Maybe in part he is saying: You can seek God in books or prayers or creeds or good works or a perfectly sung motet. All fine. But don’t overlook the sustaining and loving presence of God that comes your way in life’s most ordinary things and moments. *The kingdom of heaven is already all around you, already here, available to be seen, tasted, touched and known, right where you are.*

On a pedestal at the Garage Sale of Jesus, in back of the table, a treasure is displayed. It had been hidden in a field, right in the middle of town. No one knows how long it had been there. Many who see it feel remorse. *I know that field! I walk past it every day. Too bad I never had a clue about the treasure..*

Maybe Jesus puts the treasure out there so that we will wonder about some undiscovered treasure in our lives, waiting there. Waiting. What might that treasure be? How would we recognize it? What would we do with it if it surfaced?

And then, in the little jewelry display case, there's that pearl. You know just by looking at it that it's priceless. The guy who found it: was he just lucky? Or had he trained his eye for years, painstakingly studying 10,000 ordinary pearls, biding his time, hoping a discovery like this? Maybe Jesus has put the pearl out there so that you and I might wonder about our own eyes, if they are well-enough trained to recognize real value.

Finally, in a cooler under the table at this garage sale are some fish. They're nice ones. Someone knew how to spot the fish like these that will sell at market or that have other value from what was just waste. It may lead one to wonder about the emotionally and spiritually wasteful attachments, burdensome memories and destructive habits that inevitably get caught in the same net as our own worthy aspirations and commitments.

Framing this message as if it's a garage sale may lead you to think I'm being frivolous. But Jesus knows his audience. They lived, as we live, with blindness and seeing, failures and successes, choices between persevering or giving up. His original hearers knew, as we know, all about the haves and the have-nots, fear of the future, abuses of power by some who govern, police or have the money. They knew, as we do, how precarious life can be. They asked, as we ask, *Where is our just and loving God in all of this?*

These parables are not a unified theology of God or suffering or evil or heaven. But they are invitations to seek, and to do so with curiosity and purpose. Jesus is inviting us to catch the glimpses of heaven that come our way in the most ordinary moments of this life that we are living, right now, exactly as it is. Or, on a very different note, maybe Jesus is challenging our attachments to life as it is, so familiar that we can't even imagine and aren't prepared to see some treasure, in or around us, waiting to be discovered.

Maybe we'll take home a determination to look at and sort out all that's piled up and what's become stuck in the nets of our lives. Maybe we'll come away with the treasure of a new way of seeing that will lead to a new way of being. I'm sure that Jesus most wants us to look for the image or moment or message that will make more real and bring alive and draw us closer into what he called the kingdom of heaven. Amen.