

"The Church: Treasured. Covered Up. Purchased. Sorted."

Matthew 13:44-52

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

July 26, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, Jesus' continuing monologue of parables, including three today, and concluding with these words, "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

For much of Church history, people have been taught these parables in a manner that advocates they give up all that is theirs, all the treasures of earth, and lay claim to Jesus, the great treasure hidden in the field of the world and for them to find... Jesus, the pearl of great price, for which we ought sell everything that he may be ours. We even have some hymns in our hymnal that sing of "Jesus, Priceless Treasure" and "One thing's needful; Lord this treasure." The sentiment is not wrong, we'll note that late in the sermon. But that's not the lesson of these parables! These parables are not about how much you are supposed to love and give everything for Jesus; rather, these parables are about how much he has loved and given everything for you.

Let's recall the context of the other parables we've heard in the last few weeks: "All the world is the field" we heard and sang last week. And, if the world is the field, what do you suspect is hidden in

it – not Jesus, but *the Church!*, the wheat entangled with the weeds, that Church that (Jesus elsewhere said) is *in* the world, but not *of* it? And, did Jesus not differentiate between the Church and world by saying, “all who have ears to hear, let him hear.” And so, for the sake of His Church, that very precious few, does he not appeal to the Holy Father to “keep them from the evil one... keep them in Your Name”? Yes, we can almost summarize that high priestly prayer as Jesus praying, “Holy Father, I pray for the Church. Keep it safe.”

And, if that’s what we hear in his High Priestly prayer, if that’s what we heard in last week’s parable when Jesus said, “No, don’t pull up the weeds, lest in so doing you harm also the wheat,” then we can understand that this is exactly what Jesus is speaking of when he says, “The kingdom of heaven is like.” ‘God acting redemptively in Christ Jesus for the sake of the Church’ is like this...

Indeed, for ease of understanding, you may hear the phrase “the kingdom of heaven” to be synonymous with the phrase “the Church.” When the disciples are sent on their little mission trips and told to shake the dust off their feet toward those who refuse to hear and say, “Nevertheless, the kingdom of heaven has come to this place,” they might as well have said, “the Church has come to this place” – not as if saying, “Nevertheless, a voters assembly and youth group and membership list have come to this place,” but rather as if saying, “All of the riches and treasures of Jesus Christ – won upon the cross by appeasing the righteous anger of the Father, all those

blood-bought treasures now poured out upon his people through the work of His Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament – all of that great good news that is for you and your household, all of it has been offered to you as the Holy Spirit has drawn near to gather you in with the angels and archangels and all the company of those who have ears to hear. The kingdom of Heaven has come near.”

In the same way, when Jesus begins his parables, “The kingdom of heaven is like,” we ought hear him say, “God’s work in Christ Jesus for the good of the Church is like this...” And, if we hear that correctly, then these parables are quite simple, but quite profoundly comforting. They are the parable form of what we hear Moses say to the children of God in the Old Testament reading:

You are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his *treasured* possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth (or, shall we say, out of all the field.)”

Doesn’t that sound a lot like the first parable of our text, in which the Lord lays claim to this great treasure? But the parable adds this little element: that the one loving this treasure knows he cannot just snatch it away without owning the whole field, so he hides the treasure in the field, buys the entire field and – with it – the treasure. As the apostle says to the Church, “Christ died for our sins – and not for ours only – but for the sins of the whole world”... why for the whole world? That he might lay claim to the Church he so dearly treasured. Why the whole world because “God so loved the world

that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him (that's the Church, isn't it?) shall not perish but have everlasting life." For the sake of the Church, Jesus gives up all that is his to pay the price for the whole world.

And, while on his way to purchase that whole world for the sake of the treasure, do we not hear those periodic cryptic passages that show the Lord very definitively knew the difference between the whole field and the treasure hidden in it? Have we not heard in recent weeks Jesus say, "I thank you, Father, that you have kept these things *hidden* to the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children"? Again, in the very same chapter as our text, Jesus was asked by the disciples why he always spoke in parables, and Jesus answered, "*To you* it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to *them* it has not been given." Again, as Jesus revealed those secrets of the kingdom to these first disciples of his Church, Jesus commanded them *not to tell anyone* until the resurrection! And so, all these cryptic actions of Jesus put flesh-and-blood on the parable: "he covered up the treasure. Then, in his joy, he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field."

Yes, **for you** (we love to hear that phrase, but often interpret it far too generically and broadly) *for you*, Christ laid down his life and gave up all that He had... *for you*. You who are in the world, but – by baptism – no longer of the world... so that you can confess both broadly of the world and (cryptically) more narrowly of the Church,

"who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the virgin Mary, and was made man." For us, for you, Jesus went and gave all that was His to the Father that He might purchase you... even (remarkably) while we were yet his enemies, Christ died for us.

And that's a point not to pass by too quickly. These parables do not teach us to think that Jesus saw something in the Church **worth** saving. Go back to the Old Testament reading, when Moses says to the Old Testament Church, "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you." Indeed, there's nothing special by nature about those who may now delight in being numbered among the Church. Why would we expect the Church to be numerically glorious or expect people in the pew to be less sinful by nature, no spats between siblings, quarrels among couples, feuds among fellow members? – such is not why you are numbered among the Church. Rather, Moses instructs us, "it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers." Yes, our fathers in the faith have handed down that faith – a faith believing not in itself and its own merit – but a faith in God's covenant promises in the coming Christ, those promises that make him (as Moses says) "the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations."

So, because of the God who keeps his covenant and sends His Messiah, we are to him a treasure for which he will buy the whole world; or, as the second parable says it, we – the Church – are the one pearl of great value.

Or, as the third parable reminds us, we are those caught by the fishers of men and dragged in the net into the safety of the boat, the ark that is the Church. Yes, the net is cast far and wide, just as the seed is sown far and wide. And, where the seed plants faith in the heart, the net gathers us into the Church.

And, lo and behold, at the end of the third parable, there's that refrain again:

"...at the close 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."

Didn't we say last week that Jesus always seems to have his attention focused on the harvest? Here it is again – not in imagery of wheat in the storehouse, nor in the imagery of sheep separated from goats, but in imagery of the fish caught in the net. Yes, it is true that the Gospel catches a whole host of fish... and, as the parable of the sown seed also illustrates, some will have the Gospel for a time, then give up on it in the scorching heat of life's tribulations. Likewise, here, the fishermen cast out the net of the Gospel and haul in a whole host of numbers into the Church on earth. Through infant baptism and youth confirmation and adult catechesis many are at

some point in life “members of the Church”... but, the parable hints, it's okay to admit and expect that some will leave the Church – will ‘flop out of the boat’ (or even have to be thrown out because of impenitence!) and, all throughout the life of the Church on earth, there will be an ongoing intermingling between faithful and unfaithful, well-rooted and poorly-rooted... so that the Church will know days of joy with new members and days of sorrow at the pain of those falling away. But, on that last day, the angels will have done all the sifting that needs be done – the “good fish” from the “bad fish”, the wheat from the tares, the sheep from the goats, and they will have sorted through the entire haul that the Gospel net has caught.

Jesus asks the Twelve, “Do you understand these things?” So, do you? Do you understand that you have been named by God to be a priceless treasure and pearl of great value, so that this inheritance that is yours, this kingdom of heaven to which you've been given access... this divine Church to which you've been called, from out of the world... this inheritance that is yours in Christ Jesus... this is worth more than anything in all the world.

That's how Jesus concludes: “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

The English makes it sound like the master of the house (or, we might say, the head of household) *brings* out what is new and

old. If such is the case, do not the heads of household well-trained in the Scriptures bring out the covenantal promises of old and new testament alike and see in them the one united picture of God's faithfulness and steadfast love toward "those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations"?

But the Greek word for "bring out" could also be translated "casts out." To throw out and cast away both the new and the former because the treasure of Christ's covenant with His Church is better.

It's not so difficult for us to throw out the former things when something better grabs us. Such is the *faithful* actions of the "master of the house" who says to his household: "Pandemic? Old news – we have Christ and the Church. Social unrest? Old news – we have Christ and the Church. Chicago and surrounding neighborhoods threatened each night, without any local leadership, leaving suburbs wondering when the chaos will spill into *their* streets? Old news – we have Christ and the Church." Yes, it's easy to throw out the former we don't like. But what of the former that is more like a treasured relic and heirloom? Does the head of household learn-ed in the Scriptures not guide his family this way: "Family will and testament? Ok. But our new testament is in Christ and his Church. Family keepsake? Ok. But our inheritance is in Christ and his Church. Family tradition? OK. But our customs and traditions are now grounded in and focused on Christ and his Church."

Indeed, we can so safely exchange the former things with the new things of Christ... “the former things have passed away, the new has come,” St. Paul says. How easy and natural it sometimes seems to exchange the *old* of earth with the *new* of heaven.

But, what about giving up the new of earth? What about throwing out the new things of the household... those new things that suddenly enter our lives and grab our attention, our hopes, and – at least immediately – bring us comfort? Even then, does the wise “master of the house” not still point his family to Christ and Christ’s lasting covenant promises and Christ’s never-ending love for His Church? And, thus, the head of house says, “New windfall of money? Ok, but our eyes are still fixed on Christ and his Church. New baby in the house, demanding our energy? Ok, but our eyes are still fixed on Christ and his Church. New boyfriend for my daughter or girlfriend for my son? Ok, but their eyes are still to be fixed on Christ and his Church. New job, new town, new home? – perhaps that’s in our future, but “same old” Word and Sacrament and Divine Service and pastoral care, for our eyes will always be fixed on Christ Jesus and his Church, priceless treasure, the one thing needful.

Come, let us fix our eyes on Christ Jesus, who for the joy set before him endured the cross... or, shall we say, who “in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field”... buys the whole world with the full riches of his blood and merit... giving up everything for the sake of that dear treasure, that Church that is his

pearl of great price, his net cast and now full of the faithful, his storehouse of harvested wheat, his holy and precious bride and – with her – together, their dear precious children, you – baptized sons and daughters of God.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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