

“Betting on the Kingdom”

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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Treasure box. Have you ever actually seen one? Ever had a chance to open one? I have.

In my first congregation, one of the elder gentlemen Sam Edwards had a treasure trove ~ sort of. He had inherited the boarded-up dry goods store in town. It was far more than just an empty building.



His uncle had started the business in 1914. Then one evening in the early 60's without any fanfare whatsoever, Mr. Edwards just simply locked the door and went home that night never again to open the store. It was left exactly as it had been – ready for business.



Everything from dresses to dungarees, toenail clippers to tie tacks, bolts of fabric, underwear, luggage, socks, suits, slacks, ties were still all neatly on the dusty shelves – seemingly lined up for customers who would never come. Including upstairs in the very back of the store a dozen or so trunks someone had left for storage but who had never come back to collect. Therein lies the origin of the treasure trove.

Mr. Edwards had a generous spirit and took the newly minted pastor on a tour of the store. After choking dust for a few minutes, the



highlight for him way in the back was the last, still unopened trunk. He had no idea what had been in any of them, but he had sold each of the previous ones for \$50 to anyone who was curious enough to pay good money to see what might be inside.

He made me the same offer ~ perhaps a treasure trove of antiques or perhaps a pile of discarded clothes. I prudently declined. It turned out that this trunk was filled like all the rest with only disintegrated dirty rags which had once been someone's nice clothes.

What would you spend on a treasure trunk? Would you spend \$50 for a chance on greatness or garbage? How about \$5? How about \$5,000? Prudence dictates it really isn't worth the risk at any price.

However, what if you knew it was a sure thing? What would you spend if you knew for certain there was an invaluable treasure in the trunk? What does prudence dictate in this case?

Just so! What would you give to become part of God's story? Surely you would be glad to give \$5 to enter God's kingdom. Yet I am not at all sure any of us would joyfully invest \$5 million in God's plan.

Which is precisely Jesus' \$5M point in his parable:

“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.”



What would you give in exchange for a treasure trove?

Jesus is asking us to bet on the kingdom. Even more he is telling us it is a sure thing ~ to wager with absolutely unshakable confidence. Jesus wants us to sell everything, liquidate our entire stock, lose the house and pawn everything else and put it down on the kingdom. What does he think we are, crazy?

What are the risks? Are the promised benefits real? Are they certain? Each of us has to decide if it is a sure thing or if the kingdom of heaven presents an unacceptable risk. It comes down to core faith.

Do you really believe Jesus when he says: despite and contrary to all present appearances, the kingdom of heaven is a sure bet, a certain thing? Do you believe Jesus? Not just belief *in* Jesus, do you really and truly trust God?

As if he knows we might want to weasel out of this challenge, Jesus reiterates this same point in his next parable:

“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.”

Let's be honest! I am not at all sure any of us really have this in us – to give up everything we possess and everything we are. Indeed, few of us seem to be willing to give up much of anything for the intangible promises of some future fulfillment. I think most of our commitments to God's kingdom are closer to the \$5 to \$50 range than the higher end. From our human perspective this is a sucker bet ~ like wagering \$5 million on there being a treasure in an old beat-up trunk.

Prudence dictates...the benefits of God's reign on earth are not worth the risks – at any price – but prudence be hanged!! Jesus' point is that the insiders in the kingdom know it is not a sucker bet at all, but it is in fact the surest thing they have ever seen or ever will.

These parables tell us that to enter God's kingdom we joyfully throw off our prudence. Why? Because of the inestimable value of life lived

among God's family ~ the benefits so far outweigh the relatively microscopic costs.

It is extremely hard for us earth-bound mortals to do precisely what God asks of us in these parables.

Think how many times we hear at church: "We don't have the money to do this or that." Just last week here in worship we heard the Mission committee requesting help in getting backpacks for school children in Center Hill. Remember among the reasons: "we don't have any money."

I cannot tell you how many times over and over we say something like that at Session meetings. These days you hear the same lament in every congregation you can name. Yes, Virginia, even at the ones you are thinking of which seem to be so wealthy and healthy, they too are laying off staff and cutting programs.

Now contrast that with a report I just heard of a family that was so committed to a project at their congregation that they took out a second mortgage on their home to pay for half of it! Prudent, no ~ extreme risk, yes ~ growing God's kingdom, we pray so.

Remember that Jesus' parables go beyond surprising. Jesus' parables are designed to shock the prudence out of us – to shake out our risk-averse souls and turn us into courageous adventurers, explorers and pioneers.



What more can we glean from these parables? Quite a bit. Today we have a kaleidoscope of parables, a dizzying panorama of God's kingdom ~ each more challenging than the last ~ each a tiny vignette of one single aspect of God's awesome story breaking into history.

Jesus starts with two quite familiar parables shared in common with both Mark and Luke:

“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.”

“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.”

So seemingly simple.

1. At one level, and there are many levels of meaning in every parable, at just one level these two illuminate how things that are small and hidden becomes large and revealed.

Just so with God’s story, it is only barely observable today but in the fullness of time it will fill the whole universe. Betting on God is the one and only sure and safe bet ~ an absolute certainty. You can bet the farm on God and God’s story.

2. At another level, this is about personal faith. When a person is healed we are changed – at first it is just something we feel inside and know only within ourselves but over time it will become apparent in a very public way.

When Jesus comes into our hearts, when we become part of God’s awesome story for the universe, when our lives and souls are aligned with God’s plan, we feel it inside at first but soon it cannot be held back: it is made apparent and clearly visible by our changed lives.

3. At yet another level, these two parables are about congregational growth. Boy, this is what we wanted to hear!

We are desperate to hear about God’s promise of growth in size, in ministry, in finances! We at Crosspoint are feeling just as tiny as a mustard seed and as punched down as a lump of raw dough. After so

many blows, losses and disappointments we feel that we have certainly been through the wringer – even exhaling our last breath. We long for, we pray for membership and financial growth, to become spiritual cedars of Lebanon, a giant witness to our LORD.

Instead, we are at the end of our rope. These parables tell us of God's promise of growth – promises of organic growth like seeds or yeast bread. And God's promises are real – you can bet on them – the only sure wager there is.

Yet again, we need to be careful what we pray for. Every one of Jesus' parables contains both a promise for us and a challenge to us. Cell churches grow but is it God's growth?

Cells in our bodies grow and that is normal healthy growth. Cancer cells swell, divide and grow but it is not healthy growth. Cancer steals much needed nutrients from other cells and releases toxins, compresses healthy cells and destroys them.

Congregations may grow but it may or may not be growth of God's kingdom. Big church is not necessarily better church. Large is not necessarily righteous. The way is wide and well-travelled which leads to destruction, but the way is narrow which leads to life. We desperately want to grow – need to grow. "LORD, give us growth. But how do we grow in your way?"

God's will is that we reach out and touch people with Jesus' kingdom message, but why do we do it?

- To add members to increase our size?
- To have enough members to meet the budget?
- To make our congregation have higher status among the religious community in our town?

Frankly if these are our motives – and let's be honest, they are what we have been saying every time outreach comes up – if these are our motives, we are not seeking kingdom growth. Just to say we need more people so we can have more money is cancerous and toxic to God's

plan. Doing the right thing for the wrong reason is to deny God's purpose.

What if our motivation is:

- Because we have experienced life in God's reign, life for the ages; with all its incredible power to love, accept, forgive and reconcile; and we want others to have the same experience?

If that is indeed our motivation, then God's promised growth is kingdom growth, the right kind of growth, the healthy kind.

“Seek first God's reign and its righteousness and all these other things will be taken care of.” [Matthew 6:33]

If we want to grow in God's way we need to look at everything we do as individuals and as a congregation and ask “does this serve the kingdom?” If the answer is “no” we must jettison it? If the answer is “yes” we must enhance it.

Remember that report of a family that was so committed to a project at their congregation that they took out a second mortgage on their home to pay for half of it?² Who would do that for an unopened raggedly trunk? Surely they would have looked inside and knew for certain that the box contained a true kingdom treasure – knew for absolute certain that it was a sure bet – before they would make such a wager.

If what we are doing as a congregation truly serves God's kingdom, followers of Jesus are ready to commit themselves. If what we do is merely religious seeming busywork, there will never be an end to financial worries, and continued decline in size is inevitable. I am sorry, but that is the harsh reality of Jesus' parables: they startle. They contain both promise and expectation.

So then what would you give to become part of God's story? Is it worth everything we possess and all that we are? Is it worth \$5? Is it worth \$50? \$5,000? \$5M?

At some point every analogy breaks down, so we should be careful not to push it any further. Despite what the parable of the treasure in

the field may indicate, the kingdom of God is not a possession we can gain, a treasure trunk to add to our list, but it is something that instead grabs us, possesses us. Yes, Jesus calls us to be possessed by his rule, to joyfully submit to his reign, to join gratefully in God's family and to become a full participant in God's story.

Jesus calls us to wager everything on the kingdom of God. Nothing less will do.



¹ Brian Stoffregen "Proper 12 // Lectionary 17 A: Exegetical Notes on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52" *Gospel Notes for This Sunday* p. 6

² *Ibid*