

“The Kingdom Treasure”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12A) – 29 & 30 July 2017  
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

In 1795, a sixteen-year-old named Daniel McGinnis rowed his boat over to a small island off of Nova Scotia to fish. Fishing takes a lot of patience, something in short supply for many teenagers, so he took a break and wandered into the forest, where he found an oak tree with odd carvings on it. Beneath the tree there was a strange depression in the ground that caught his attention. It sparked in his memory stories he’d been told about how pirates once came ashore to hide treasure there. So he went home, brought back a few friends, and they started digging.

Their patience and persistence was rewarded when about three feet down they found a platform of flagstones, and as they dug deeper, they uncovered log platforms at regular intervals. Someone had obviously put a lot of effort into sealing up this shaft, so much effort that something really precious must be hidden somewhere underneath. So they kept digging, deeper and deeper, until they went as far as they could go with the tools they had.

They waited nine years before coming back, and eventually, they made it to a depth of about 90 feet. If you’ve ever dug a hole by hand, you know how hard that is to get that deep. There at 90 feet, they discovered a stone inscribed with strange symbols, which they took as a message that they must be close. So they excavated a little more and decided to call it quits and come back the following Monday. When they got back, though, the pit was flooded with sea water. It appears they had triggered some sort of trap designed to thwart unwanted visitors, and no matter how hard they bailed, the water level stayed the same.

Since then, over the span of two centuries, people have gone to that place, some sinking everything they owned into that hole in hopes of finding a way to pry the secret out of the

ground, and several people have died trying. Alternative sites have been excavated, and more coded clues have been found etched on rocks all over the island, but they only make the mystery harder to unravel. Even the benefits of modern technology – drilling equipment, ground-penetrating radar, and remote cameras – have failed to find anything of significance.

Theories abound about what might be down there. Some still think it's a pirate hoard, a huge one considering how much trouble somebody took to conceal it. Others believe that something of even greater value lies beneath, a trove of ancient secrets and artefacts, like the lost treasure of the Knights Templar, or the Ark of Covenant, or evidence of alien life, or maybe documents that reveal the existence of Atlantis.

Who knows whether anybody will manage to find whatever it is and haul it up to the surface? Yet the adventure continues, despite the difficulties and dangers: curiosity unyielding in the face of challenges and failures; and though every attempt probably started with hopes of gold and jewels and silver, I think what's really driven people onward has been the human impulse to explore, to discover the unknown.

Imagine what might happen if that same intensity, that same type of sacrifice, were applied to seeking the kingdom of heaven. Certainly, Jesus gave us clues much easier to decipher. We're looking for something small that has the potential to grow exponentially, like a mustard seed that someday will become a sheltering tree or a small pinch of yeast that can expand a lump of dough into nourishing bread. We're looking for a priceless pearl, unique in luster and perfect in proportion, worth giving up everything to obtain. So the kingdom offers protecting shelter, satisfying nourishment that gives strength, and a beauty we can hardly imagine until we see it, and only then will we know that we've found what we've been looking for.

It takes patience born of hope. From seed to tree means waiting for years, and not every seed germinates and pushes up through the surface and flourishes. It takes a lot less time for yeast to make a batch of dough rise, but it can feel like forever if you're really hungry for homemade bread, and sometimes the yeast is bad and doesn't work, and we have to deal with disappointment and try again. That pearl merchant may have spent the better part of his life searching, and I can just see him appraising a pearl wondering, "Is this the one?" only to pass on it and then torture himself with thoughts that he might not find a better one, until that doubt passes and he comes to believe once more that it's got to be out there somewhere.

As people of faith, we know the kingdom's out there somewhere, and we also sense that it's in here, too, ready to be found and shared, just waiting to be celebrated and appreciated and prized and praised. Unlike whatever's stuck in the ground in Nova Scotia, the kingdom wants to be found. God wants us to find it. And the strange thing is, this remarkable realm of peace is both profound yet somehow surprisingly simple, manifest in the most ordinary things.

And sometimes, we simply stumble upon the kingdom, like the guy in the parable who found a buried treasure and with great joy sold everything to buy that field. Sometimes, the kingdom finds us, when we least expect it. Will we recognize the kingdom for the treasure it is? Will we just yank that treasure out of the dirt and haul it away, or will we honor the sacred ground where we found it, and sacrifice everything to hold onto it in a wholesome way?

Of course, the kingdom means much more than the metaphors Jesus gave us. He points to something that cannot be defined. Jesus gave us hints, clues, to give us a better idea of what we're looking for and how to find it and how to recognize the kingdom when we find it or when it finds us, but words alone – even the words of Jesus – cannot fully describe what life in the kingdom of heaven is like.

It is a reality that must be experienced, in ever greater measure, as part of a lifelong quest to know a joy that makes us do crazy things, the kind of crazy that comes only from true wisdom. And when we catch a glimpse of it, when the kingdom touches us and we sense its glory, it grabs hold of us, and we don't want it to let go, because the kingdom changes us in such a way that everything else becomes unappealing, unacceptable. We simply cannot live as we once did. To go back to how it was before brings would be dreadful letdown, a dislocation of where and who we're meant to be.

For each person, the path is a little different. No one seeks or finds the kingdom quite the same way. But the purpose is the same, and that's why God calls us together, to be companions on the way, searching and finding, learning and discerning, growing into a kingdom people, for whom complacency is a foreign concept, because the adventure is just too much fun, too rewarding to give up despite its risk and rigor. So keep on digging. Keep on deciphering the clues. Bring friends to help, and help them hunt for the greatest treasure ever. Amen.