

Hidden in Plain Sight

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Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52

I recently spent a weekend with our grandson, Ben, at the *You and Me Camp* at Camp Cazadero. It is a camp designed for young children and one parent, grandparent or guardian. I had some concerns. Ben and I had never spent that much time together – just the two of us. How would he handle the nights? Would he want to go home? I needn't have worried. He loved it from the very beginning. On Saturday night we sat in large circle in the meadow and shared our favorite parts of the day. Ben was sitting in my lap. Andy DelMonte was one of the leaders and he led us in some songs. I want to share one of the songs we sang, a song I'm sure I have sung a hundred times at various camps:

*How could anyone ever tell you,
you are anything less than beautiful?
How could anyone ever tell you, you are less than whole?
How could anyone fail to notice, that your living is a miracle?
How deeply you're connected to my soul.*

As I said, I have sung that song many times. But that night, singing those words, with Ben on my lap, I noticed tears running down my cheeks. I was stunned by the tears. Why this night when there had never been tears before. I believe that for me, that evening friendship was a moment of clarity, a moment in which I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt, what matters most.

I am reminded of a story told by a pastor: "I have never been to the greyhound dog races, but I have seen them on television. The dogs exhaust themselves chasing that mechanical rabbit around the ring. When they get to the point where they can no longer race, the owners put a little ad in the paper to see if anyone would like to adopt one for a pet. You can have a dog for free, but if it is not adopted, more often than not it is destroyed.

"I have a niece in Arizona who cannot stand the thought of these dogs being destroyed, so she goes out and adopts them. She has several of these old greyhound dogs in her house. She loves them. I was in her house not long ago and one of the dogs, a big, spotted greyhound, was lying there in the den. One of the kids in the family, a toddler, was pulling on the old dog's tail, and another had his head on the dog's stomach, using it as a pillow. The dog seemed so happy. So I asked him, 'Are you still racing?'

"'No,' the dog said, 'I don't race anymore.'

"'Do you miss the glitter and excitement of the track?'

"'No,' he replied.

"'Did you get too old to race?'

"'No, I still had some races in me.'

"'Well, what then? Did you not win?'

"'Actually, I won over a million dollars for my owner.'

"'Then did they treat you badly?'

"'Oh no,' the dog said, 'They treated us like royalty when we raced.'

"'Then why aren't you still racing?'

He said, 'Because I quit.'

"'You quit?'

"'Yes, I quit.'

"'But why?'

"'I quit when I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit. All that running and running and running and what I was chasing was not even real.'"

In telling these parables, could Jesus be asking us what we are chasing, and in all our running and chasing, are we chasing after that which is real, that matters most? Jesus says that the kingdom is like a man who finds buried treasure in a field, covers it back up, and sells all that he owns to buy the field. And second, the kingdom is like a merchant who searches for and finds a pearl of great price, selling all *he* owns to buy *it*. Each man finds something of great value and sells all he has to make it his own. Each man finds something that makes everything else he owns trivial by comparison, and he does not think twice about trading it all in."

My mind goes back to the friendship circle at Camp Caz with Ben on my lap. As we sang that song, I knew that all my worries, all my calendar issues, even my concerns about church finances, as important as they are and as much as I will think about them in the coming week, really meant nothing in comparison to my love for that little boy, and in that moment I would not have hesitated to give them all up for him. As I said, it was a moment of discovery, everything seemed to come into focus for me, I knew what most mattered. And that, says Jesus, is the value of this Kingdom of God which I am constantly preaching about.

When Jesus first appears in the Gospels he proclaims the Kingdom of God is at hand. At other times, in today's parables for example, he suggests that this Kingdom is already present among us. But what is it? What should we be looking for? In our Sunday morning Bible study, there were some

thoughtful concerns raised about the word, “kingdom.” First there is the image of God as a male on a throne, well, like a king. Not an image everyone was fond of or found particularly helpful. And the idea of a king and his subjects seems so hierarchical. God up there, the rest of us down here. Perhaps we should instead talk about the reign of God or the dominion of God. Again, all legitimate concerns.

But New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, insists that Jesus very intentionally uses the word, Kingdom. He cautions us not to miss the political edge to Jesus’ use of this word. In a world ruled by Rome, where the emperor was viewed as a God, it was a radical thing to speak of another kingdom, another ruler, another Lord. For if God is king, ruler, Lord, then Caesar cannot be; if God has the power, then the religious elites in the Jerusalem temple don’t. When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God, he is inviting us to envision what the world would look like if God were king and the rulers of the world were not.

What is the kingdom? It is a world of justice, peace, and mercy for all; a world of blessing and happiness for all. It is a world of food for the hungry, healing for the sick, and freedom for the oppressed. Take another look at Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. That is his vision of the Kingdom of God – the poor are blessed, the hungry are filled, those who sorrow find themselves laughing, and immigrant children, frightened and far from home, find compassion. Reflecting on this Kingdom, Carol Marie Noren provides a more personal spin when she writes, “What is the Kingdom of God? It is to be known, to be understood, to be accepted and cherished for who we are. It is the joy of remembering relationships that matter more than things. It is deliverance when the storms of life are raging...It is discovering that there is one who knows and understands ‘the real you,’ and who cares for you. It is deliverance from the sting of death, the assurance that neither death nor life nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” This, she says, is what matters, this is a treasure worth pursuing. It’s as if these deceptively simple parables are drawing us in, addressing us at the deep places of our yearning.

Which leads to a final point... namely that it is here, the treasure is here, among us, in our midst, even now. You might say it is hidden in plain sight. A story shared by a pastor: “One of my college mentors started his career as a parish minister in the Deep South, right around the time the Civil Rights movement was really heating up. One Sunday he preached a sermon in which he called for desegregation. Afterwards he was shaking hands on the way out of church when a man came up to him. ‘See that man over there?’ he asked. He’s the head of the local Ku Klux Klan, and he’s not happy with you, pastor.’

“Sometime after that, a call came in the middle of the night. That local Klan leader wanted to meet with the young pastor at a roadside bar out in the country. The pastor went to the bar and sat down across from the Klansman. He could hardly believe what happened next. The man told him he could no longer be the man he had been, and he knew he needed God’s help if he was going to be able to change. And so he asked the young preacher, ‘Would you pray with me?’

The stunned pastor, looking around at the bar and pool tables and mostly intoxicated patrons, said. ‘Pray here?’

And the man said, ‘Preacher, don’t you believe in God?’

In that moment, the preacher learned, or re-learned, that God can be anywhere, the Kingdom can break in anywhere, often when and where we least expect it: even in a roadside dive, even in the heart of a man who had made a lifetime of bad and hurtful choices.

When you think of finding something like the Kingdom of Heaven, it seems you should start someplace holy – St. Peters in the Vatican, the National Cathedral, the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and other Holy Land locations, this church sanctuary, or perhaps Lambeau Field in Green Bay. What? You don’t agree? But our parables would seem to suggest that it may not matter where we are as long as we keep our eyes open to clues, stay alert and expectant. Says Barbara Brown Taylor, “There is always the possibility, you know, that God decided to hide the kingdom of heaven not in any of the extraordinary places that treasure hunters would be sure to check, but in the last place that any of us would think to look, namely in the ordinary circumstances of our everyday lives: like a silver spoon in the drawer with the stainless, like a diamond necklace on the bureau with the rhinestones; the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary, the kingdom of heaven all mixed in with the humdrum and ho-hum of our days, as easy to find as a child’s smile when she awakes from sleep, or the first thunderstorm after a long drought – all of them signs of the kingdom, clues to all the holiness hidden in even the dullest of our days.”

How often do we settle for less because we do not believe or recognize that there’s anything else to be had? How easily we limit our vision to the world’s limited perception.

And so it is that Jesus talks about the Kingdom in terms of merchants buying and selling things and fishermen sorting fish and bakers baking. Dare to glimpse what is hidden in plain sight, dare to commit to the justice and mercy and hope God intends for our world. For the treasure is buried, not in some exotic far-off place that requires a special map or special skill or profound spiritual gifts. Rather, “X” marks the spot right here, right now, in all the ordinary places and people of our lives. Here and now are the places to look for the will and rule and presence of God. For, says Taylor, “If we cannot find them here we will never find them anywhere else, for earth is where the seeds of heaven are sown, and their treasure is the only one worth having.”