

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

We have been treated these past couple weeks to two of Jesus' parables about the kingdom of heaven, the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. Today, we heard three more parables; three times today we heard: "*The kingdom of heaven is like ...*" (Matt. 13:44, 45, 47).

More than just the parables, we, as Jesus' disciples, have been treated His explanations of these parables. The Parable of the Sower taught us why the Good News about Jesus doesn't always succeed. The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds taught us that, as disciples, we're surrounded by the unrighteous and unbelieving.

Believers are encouraged by these parables. In the first, we come to understand that the Word of God has taken root in us, and we are bearing fruit. And in the second, believers are taught that, enduring unto the harvest, they will be separated from the unbelieving and brought into the Lord's harvest barns, there to "*shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father*" (Matt. 13:43).

Now, the three kingdom parables we hear today are, like Jesus' explanation of the Parable of the Weeds, spoken only to the disciples. This time, the disciples didn't ask Jesus to explain them, but Jesus asked them, "*Have you understood all these things?*" And they answered Him, "*Yes.*" Do you think so? And what about you?

These parables are meant for disciples to reinforce what Jesus had taught before and to give new and comforting insights into our salvation. Certainly, in the Parable of the Net, Jesus reinforces what He had taught earlier about "*the end of the age.*" In the Parable of the Weeds, the harvest angels separate the weeds from the wheat, burn the weeds, and bring the wheat into the Lord's barns. In the Parable of the Net, Jesus uses the metaphor of casting a net into the sea and catching fish. Here, Jesus was encouraging these "*fishers of men*" (Matt. 4:19) in their commission to preach about the arrival of "*the kingdom of heaven*" (Matt. 10:7) in Christ Jesus. Their verbal net will snare both good and bad, but in the end the good will be separated from the bad. The "*righteous*" are kept, while "*the evil*" are thrown "*into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*"

Surely the disciples could understand what Jesus was getting at here. He had sent them out before. He had commissioned them to preach of the kingdom of God. He warned them — It would not all go well with them either. Some would receive them; others wouldn't. They might have to shake the dust off their feet. Similarly in their commission after Jesus ascended into heaven. They would go forth with the Good News of Jesus and the kingdom of heaven that He secured. They would preach it not just to "*the lost sheep of the house of Israel*" (Matt. 10:6), but to "*all nations*" (Matt. 28:18), making disciples as people come to believe in Jesus by His Word and by Holy

Baptism. The disciples would experience great success ... and great opposition. It did not deter them; the ultimate victory was theirs in Christ Jesus.

So, the disciples could readily understand the Parable of the Net — we can, too. But it's not so clear that they understood all of the new insights that Jesus was teaching today, for the two other parables in our text, the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price, teach us something more of Jesus and His work among us. They teach us of the great lengths that Jesus went to acquire His "*treasured possession*" — not just Israel, as the Lord taught through Moses, but you and me and all whom our God has chosen in Christ Jesus to be disciples, all whom He has predestined and called and justified and glorified.

It shouldn't surprise us. We know Jesus came "*to give his life as a ransom for*" us. St. Paul wrote, "*the man Christ Jesus, ... gave himself as a ransom for all*" (1 Tim. 2:4-6) for our salvation. And St. Peter wrote, we "*were ransomed ... not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ*" (1 Pet. 1:18-19). But when Jesus spoke of His impending suffering and death, Peter responded with a rebuke, "*Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you*" (Matt. 16:22). The disciples didn't understand it all; Jesus is the man in our parable who "*goes and sells all that he has and buys that field*"; Jesus is the merchant who "*sold all that he had and bought*" the pearl of great price.

And if that's so, then that makes YOU the treasure hidden in the field; YOU are that sought-after pearl of great price. Indeed you are! Jesus came seeking and saving YOU (Luke 19:10). You are His treasured possession. That's why St. Peter calls you "*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*" (1 Pet. 2:9). And St. Paul teaches us, "*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ... the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works*" (Tit. 2:11, 13-14).

But how easy it is to get the meaning of this parable turned around! Most of the church's teachers did just that through the years, even as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Professor Jeff Gibbs points out that Irenaeus "refers to Christ as the treasure that was hidden in the world" (Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary, Matthew 11:2-20:34*, 712-3). Luther references this parable to teach "Christ speaks of the gospel as a treasure which is hidden in a field [Matt. 13:44]" (*Luther's Works*, 31:230). Our bulletin cover artist thinks similarly. See the "treasure" in the field, in the shape of a coffin? The artist is thinking of Christ crucified or the proclamation of Him as the treasure hidden in the field.

In fact, Prof. Gibbs says: “I am not aware of any time before the nineteenth century where a writer ever mentions an interpretation of [Matthew] 13:44-46 that does not conform in some sense to the discipleship reading of these parables,” (Gibbs, 713), that is, to a reading that calls upon disciples to pursue the treasure (pearl) zealously, giving up all for it, for Jesus or the Gospel.

But, that message is comfortless. We are utter failures at this very thing. Or do you really think that you “*love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*” (Deut. 6:5)? No! There is no comfort in our half-hearted, puny efforts at keeping even the first of God’s commandments, let alone the ninth or tenth. We’re little different than that rich young man who asked Jesus “*what good deed must I do to have eternal life*” (Matt. 19:6), and when told, “*If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me*” (Matt. 19:21), “*he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions*” (Matt. 19:22). Remember, Jesus warned: “*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, ... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven .... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ... No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money*” (Matt. 6:19-21, 24). Yet, this is the very thing we covet; and we’re to receive comfort from that?

No! These parables are not about our faithfulness; they’re about God’s. They’re not about our works; they’re about God’s, in particular, Jesus’. Jesus is the man who finds the treasure hidden in the field, hides it, and selling “*all that he has ... buys that field.*” Jesus is the merchant who searched and found the one pearl of great price, who “*sold all that he had and bought it.*” Who else could these be but Him who gave up His own life for ours, who “redeemed [us], ... lost and condemned person[s], purchased and won [us] from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death”? And why? His desire is to forgive us and to save us — that we “may be His own,” His treasured possession (Small Catechism, Apostles’ Creed, Second Article).

Truly, we are the treasure, not because of any merit in us, but because we are accounted thus by God, because Jesus sold all He had to make the ransom payment for us. That’s the message that gives us comfort, along with the hope that comes from knowing that we, who are accounted righteous by faith, “live under [Christ] in His kingdom,” and we “*will shine like the sun in the kingdom of [our] Father,*” (Matt. 13:43), serving our Redeemer “in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.” Jesus is risen from the dead; He lives and reigns to all eternity; and we shall, too. For by faith “*we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor*

*things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Of course, even though it's not was these parables are about, it is still true that Jesus is our treasure — Jesus, Priceless Treasure — may our hearts always treasure Him. Luther was right, too. “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God” (*LW*, 31:230) — Lord, help us to choose this “*good portion*” (Luke 10:42). And may our pastors, teachers, and all who have been trained to serve up the kingdom to us, bring forth from this Gospel treasure “*what is new and what is old,*” that we might look to Him, foretold in the old and fulfilled in the new, who gave it all up for His Church, for you His treasure, for you His pearl of great price.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.