

The Kingdom of Heaven: To Die For

9th Sun. after Pent. – 07/30/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Matthew 13:44-52 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 44, 45, & 47 – [each introduce Jesus' parables with these words, according to the original Greek,] **"...the reign of heaven is like...a hidden treasure; ...a merchant seeking good pearls; [and] ...a net cast into the sea..."**.

Introduction

✘ What a deal! Today's Gospel Reading gives us three parables from Jesus for the price of one. Remember, parables are small, earthly stories that use comparisons to teach us important heavenly truths.

→ These particular parables compare common things on earth – seeds, soil, treasures, pearls, fishing nets to God's, or Jesus' work in re-establishing His reign as the King of kings here within His disciples in this fallen world in order to be with Him as He reigns in heaven. Parables are intended to uncover the mysteries of the kingdom to those who have faith, but to hide those truths to the hearts that reject Jesus, so that a person's eternal place in heaven is entirely dependent upon Jesus.

✘ Today the reign of heaven is compared to buried treasure, a pearl-seeking merchant, and a net in the water, being dragged behind a boat. So what's the point?

→ The heavenly reign of our Lord Jesus is hidden, costly, and universal. And in each case it literally is "to die for."

I. Hidden to the eye, but revealed to faith.

✘ The first parable from Jesus today is in verse 44. "The reign of heaven is like a hidden treasure in a field, which a man, upon finding it, concealed it. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

✘ What does this mean?

→ First, it means that the true value; the great worth of the treasure that ends up in the courts of heaven is "hidden"; not abundantly obvious to the general public. Yet that treasure is buried out in plain sight as if it were in the middle of a field. People have walked right over it, picnicked on it, or planted grain on it for years, not recognizing the treasure that was buried under the soil.

→ The treasure is Jesus' chosen disciples; the hearts and souls of all true believers in Christ. But to the rest of the world, those people look, on the outside, just like everyone else. The man in the parable though is Jesus, the true King who reigns over all. To Him these hidden souls are anything but common, they/we are the treasure of His Church.

→ And the means by which He reigns in and among us as our Lord and Savior are again hidden. To the world, His means of grace look like simple, ordinary water; nothing but a small bite of bread and a swallow of wine; and an average-sized book with words written by a bunch of old un-extraordinary men. The glory of these treasures is hidden, just like the glory of Jesus and His Godly nature are hidden under the humility of a manger and a cross, and within the flesh of a human man.

→ Hidden though is another way of saying "sacrament" or "mystery." What is hidden must be revealed; uncovered and told to you, or you wouldn't know it. And so the heavenly reign of Jesus, though truly present, is revealed only to those of faith. Though you do not see Jesus in the flesh now today, once you hear His Word, you believe it; once the waters of baptism run

over you, you are cleansed; once the body and blood touch your tongue, you are strengthened and forgiven and “the man”; the Lord Jesus is then filled with great joy because to Him, you are the “treasure” that He gave His all in order to purchase you for Himself!

→ On the outside, there’s nothing to see. As the Catechism teaches us, the kingdom comes when the Word is preached, heard, believed, and lived. But it is not seen.

✘ Second, the value of the treasure is truly seen at first only in the eye of “the man”; of Jesus. Were you or I to stumble across it; to gaze upon ourselves in the mirror or to look at any of the other people in Christ’s Church, apart from Christ’s reigning work, all we’d see is bunch of pitiful, worthless, sinners. We’d keep on walking because any attempts at reviving those sin-filled hearts and souls on our own would only come up short; would only make us shake our heads in disappointment.

→ But to Jesus, those souls that you and I see in the mirror – they are worth dying for! Like the man in the parable who went and sold everything he had and literally bought the entire farm – the dilapidated barn, the rundown house, the collapsing shed, and the rusty broken-down tractor, Jesus shed His blood and gave up His life on the cross to pay for the sins of the entire world! But understand this, my dear friends, Jesus didn’t die for a treasure that already had such great value. Instead He came and He died for souls that were destined to be thrown into the garbage dump of hell. Yet it’s His death; His burial in the tomb, and His resurrection in our place that gives us the infinite value that He now cherishes as His treasured possession!

✘ This is how God’s heavenly reign as King works within your life and mine; among us all here within His Church and among the souls of all believers around the world.

II. Precious to the Seeker and worth giving all.

✘ Again, Jesus says in His second parable, “The reign of heaven is like a man; a merchant, seeking a good pearl, and finding one very precious pearl, he went and sold everything he had and bought it” (vv. 45–46).

→ Now, the problem with this parable is that too often people have become distracted by what is often called “the pearl of great price” so that we brush right over the main point of the parable, which is the merchant “seeking” for that which he is happily willing to sell everything he owns in order to obtain it and call it his own. Imagine a Middle Eastern pearl dealer working the vendors in the jewelry market. He bargains, he wheels, he deals, looking for the best pearl at the best price. But then he finds the one; that’s the emphasis the original Greek makes; the pearl of pearls; the rarest and finest that ever popped from an oyster. And for the sheer joy of owning it, he literally sells everything he has to possess it.

→ Rather than taking you through a tour of all the ways this parable has been interpreted throughout the ages, let me just remind you of a familiar verse: “God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son” (Jn. 3:16). You see, God’s heavenly reign is all about His extraordinary love that seeks and searches every nook and cranny of His Creation for that one pearl of infinite value; that heart and soul that is the apple of His eye; that man/woman; that boy/girl that He created and He loves with His entire being. And when He finds it, He gives everything He has – His only-begotten Son – in order to make that person His treasured possession. Yes folks, again, you are the redeemed, recreated pearl in this parable. And it’s not you, but Jesus’ sacrifice that makes you so valuable.

→ Yet we, in our sin, think we can bargain with God. We think we are the shrewd merchant who works through all the pearls of the religious jewelry market. In fact we have the arrogance to think that we are the ones that find Jesus; that we’ve given everything up to own Him. That’s because we want to be the hero of the parable. Instead, the parable exposes that manmade

religion as the counterfeit coin that it is. And so, in repentance we all need to face our own reality. We can never do enough; never pay enough; never give up enough on our own to follow Jesus. It's all up to His seeking, finding, giving up and purchasing, because He is the King and His reigning work alone is what makes each one of us the one precious pearl in His kingly eyes.

- ✘ Thankfully, it's all about God's love in Christ that stops at nothing to rescue us from sin and death. It's about God's reigning work that appears hidden and mysterious to human eyes. But in Scripture He teaches us so that in faith we see Him working, in, with, and under the things of this world to pay for and redeem the entire world. And now, you are precious to God for Jesus' sake. In fact, you are worth His only Son's shed blood; His innocent suffering and death.

→ Hebrews 12:2 even says that it was "for the joy that was set before Him" that Jesus "endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." That heavenly reign you see, has not come without a price; has not been without great sacrifice. In fact for Jesus, His heavenly reign is literally one to die for, to make you His own so that you might live under Him in His eternal kingdom.

III. Universal in scope.

- ✘ Now we come to Jesus' third parable: "Again, the reign of heaven is like a net being dragged after it was thrown into the sea and gathered up from every kind [of fish]" (v. 47).

→ Again the main point is not as much about the object of the catching, or fishing in this case, as it is about the one who has cast out the net. God's heavenly reign in this world is about casting the net far and wide and deep into sea of all of humanity. His love; His sacrifice; His desire is for every heart and soul that exists and has ever existed in His Creation. As Jesus charged His disciples and therefore every one of us in His Church today, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15).

→ Sticking with the fishing theme, Jesus said in Matthew 4:19, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." So, as we now fish with His net of Word and Sacrament, we aren't the ones picking out the fish that are kept or thrown out. We are to simply haul in everything – good fish, bad fish, old tires, shoes, hubcaps, whatever; the entire world in all its goodness, badness, and ugliness. No one and nothing is outside the net of Jesus' death and resurrection. As His hands were nailed to the cross, He very literally had the "whole world in those hands".

- ✘ Yes, it's a good thing that the selection of which souls are saved is not up to us, isn't it? because by our own selfish standards, we'd all be among those cast away. But God's ways are not our ways. Romans 11:33 says, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!"

→ He drags the whole world into one dark death on the cross and then out of that death, He raises up an entirely new creation. Then and only then, according to verse 49, will His angels sort out the good and evil based only upon His reigning work of grace and truth.

Conclusion

- ✘ But know this with complete confidence, my dear friends. By Christ's gracious death, you are of great value to God the King. You are a priceless, precious pearl. You may feel worthless, and the world may not appreciate your value. As you look around, you might think you are insignificant; nothing but a grain of sand or dust in the wind. But God's heavenly reign is not about your feelings or even about what you think. Because in God's reign as King, you are His hidden treasure to die for! Yes, God bought you when you knew Him not. He saved you before you ever got the notion of being saved. He rescued you before you ever called for help. He redeemed you while you were still dead in the depth of your sin.

→ That's the heavenly reign of the King of kings; your King who was crucified and is now risen; who takes away the sin of the world; your sin and mine! He brought you into His kingdom when He made you His child in baptism; when He caught you in His net of saving faith.

✘ So, what, again, is the kingdom of heaven like? What is God's heavenly reign? In Jesus' reigning work, it is to die for. Amen.