

Sermon – Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
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Grace Lutheran Church
8 Pentecost – Year A
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“Buried Treasure”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The kingdom of heaven is like that elusive edge piece from the fourteenth puzzle done during quarantine that eludes every search and is assumed to be lost but is suddenly found by the youngest member of the family. The kingdom of heaven is like the restaurant you find in Krakow, Poland, after spending 30 minutes looking for someplace to eat only to see a five-star joint right behind you that serves the best hamburger you’ve ever had. The kingdom of heaven like is the woman who moves to Europe, who turns out to have been the love of your life all along; the two of you just hadn’t realized it until you were apart. The kingdom of heaven is also, by the way, that woman deciding to come back to America and for some reason agreeing to marry you! I’m still not sure what Erika was thinking, but grace is a wondrous, surprising thing. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus tells us, is right under our noses, hidden in plain sight, waiting to erupt with joy.
2. Jesus’ parables this morning are not expansive stories; rather, they come at us quickly, one after the other. With so much coming at us, it’s easy to look for familiar ground on which to stand. Buried treasure and priceless pearls? A bit confusing. So: The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. Ah, yes; this one we know. It was small and now it’s big. What a thing! God can make big things out of small things. True enough, but I’m not sure I hear gospel yet. Let everyone with ears, listen, Jesus might say. There are four more parables

here, and if we get stuck on the mustard seed and what we think it means, we'll be unable to take in what Jesus is saying.

3. The second parable provides the link between the mustard at the start and the catch of fish at the end, helping us see beyond the mustard seed's smallness. Greta, our ten-year old, has been exploring the art of baking. She has started making bread from scratch which, frankly, is like the kingdom of heaven. She mixes everything together, including the yeast, and then lets it sit for an hour or two until the dough rises. It was small and then it's big! But there's something more significant going on; once the dough is mixed together, there is not – in any meaningful sense – yeast or flour or anything else. There's just dough, the yeast working but fully hidden from sight. The common thread among these parables is that which cannot be seen: a mustard seed stowed away among the rest of the farmer's inputs; yeast kneaded into the dough; a treasure reburied in someone else's field; a pearl so fine that even a greedy merchant would give everything to have it; good fish caught by the same net that catches rotten fish, and probably old tires and tin cans, too. The connective tissue is not the smallness; it's the hiddenness. And that, parabolically, is what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's the thing right in front of your face that you never notice; it's the power that's working when you can't see it. The kingdom is that which is so *not* dependent upon you or your own efforts that it works even though you don't notice it.

4. Insofar as any of these five parables is determinative for the others, therefore, it's not the mustard but the buried treasure. What an odd story when you look at it! It's one thing to say that God's Kingdom is like something valuable that you don't at first see. But why is this guy digging around in someone else's field? Why, when he finds the treasure, does he not inform the rightful owner? Why does he concoct this ridiculous scheme to dig it up, rebury it, and then go to sell everything he has so that he can steal it out from under the other guy? This is hardly respectable behavior; a call to the Better

Business Bureau might be in order, if not to the police. But this parable isn't first about us, about how we might get ahead through our hard work, dumb luck, or shrewd plotting. This parable is about the kingdom of heaven, and it is God at work in the storyline. God who sends and then find Jesus, the Son, hidden in our flesh. God who buries Jesus in death, that field that the Enemy thinks he owns. God, who seems to lose everything under the earth, behind the tomb's stone, who bets it all on the field that contains the corpse of Christ. God who in giving away everything God had to give, gets back not only Jesus but everything else buried in the field. Even you and me.

5. In this world's fields, God in Christ comes to meet us. God does so in the one place we can all be found. Yes, we are so different. Some of us live long lives while others play the cello. Some prefer chardonnay while others cheer for the White Sox. Some are lefthanded while others are from Poughkeepsie. But one thing is true for all of us: We're each going to die. So that's where God meets us to begin the work of heaven's kingdom.

6. In the short story, "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" Leo Tolstoy tells the story of Pakhom, who believes that if he had just a bit more land, he wouldn't have anything to fear, not even the devil himself. It's never a good idea to tempt the devil if you're a character in a short story, and this is probably more true in the hands of nineteenth-century Russian novelists. Near the story's end, Pakhom is told he can possess any land that he can circumnavigate during a single day, if he can return to his starting back by sundown. In his ambition, Pakhom overreaches. He is struggling to make it back; all is about to be lost. But, snatching victory from defeat, he somehow makes it. The land is his! And having gained it all, he drops dead of exhaustion. The servants dig a grave and toss in the landowner who gained and then lost everything. Tolstoy ends this story: "Six feet from his head to his heels were all he needed."

7. The story of Pakhom is an allegory that warns against greed. But the story's end is where the gospel can begin. Jesus enters into that same six feet of ground, head to heel, that we will each one day occupy. Hidden in our humanity, in our sin and suffering, he goes to the cross and he dies. Just so, right in front of our noses, the hidden One finds us. Jesus, to lean on the euphemism, buys the farm, and in so doing he *buys the farm*. The whole field is his, weeds and wheat to sort out, you and me bought and brought back from death. In the singular fact of existence that we would most like to avoid, Christ comes to us, buries himself with us, and waits for his Father to reclaim the whole thing, which God does with great joy on the third day.

8. Of the year 2020, this year that seems to land body blow after body blow, the preacher Michael Chan says, "I think I can say without risk of overstatement that 2020 has been a meat grinder. Is there any gift to find in this hellscape?" With Chan, I answer: Yes. There is gift to find because God has planted Christ in our midst. There will be, there is, hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword. There is death and life; there are angels and rulers, things present and things to come; there are powers; there is height and depth beyond measure. There is all of this. But because Christ our treasure has been buried and raised, and because we have been baptized into his death, there is nothing – NOTHING – that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. We are, if I can play around with the parables in a way that Jesus might not have intended, but just might appreciate, we are transformed – no, resurrected – from yesterday's rotten fish caught in a net to tomorrow's songbirds making music to God's glory in that surprising mustard tree. A tree of life that didn't so much grow from something small but from something dead, cast into the ground and forgotten, the buried treasure of the crucified Christ upon which we can stake our very lives. The kingdom of heaven is like a world in which the dead come to life, forever in heaven and even now, hidden in this world to work for the kingdom of life. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.