

Presbyterian Church of Stanley
14895 Antioch Road
Overland Park, KS 66221
913-681-8180 / www.stanleypres.org

“Two Stories about Big Spenders”

Sermon Series: Twice Told Tales: Parables for Skeptics

Scripture Lesson: *Matthew 13:44-46*

Sunday, July 29, 2007©

Eric Laverentz, Senior Pastor

You are God’s treasure. His pearl of great price. And that’s no secret. Would you pray with me please?

Father God, we thank you for this day. And we are so grateful for your love and the gift of your Son Jesus Christ. We cannot imagine the deep reservoirs of grace which would cause you to give Him up for us. Fill us with your Word this morning through the power of your Holy Spirit. We pray all this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

The question I want to deal with this morning is “What is the secret of life?” This is a very old question—a question which became a caricature of itself—which has suddenly become quite popular again recently. The ancient people were convinced that there was some overarching, all important secret knowledge which explained the success of some people and the demise of others. Those who had access to the secret did well in life, quite well. They experienced heaven on earth. And those who did not know the secret faltered and failed. In the last few years, with the rise of *The Da Vinci Code*, the sudden interest in the so-called lost gospels, Gnosticism, even the movie *The Secret*, we have seen once again the idea that there is a great secret. A secret which, if we are able to master, will radically alter the course of our life and help us live out our best hopes and dreams. We will go to great lengths to dig out this secret.

When I helped my parents move from their home last year, I came very close to creating a disaster. My father has an antique Chinese vase, probably a couple of hundred years old. It has been in my family longer than me, and more than once I have heard my Dad mention that it is the most valuable

object he owns. Unfortunately my Dad packaged the vase in the middle of newspaper clippings in a black trash bag. Thinking that the bag was simply trash, I took it and tossed it into the dumpster—but only after swinging it around four or five times to get some good height on it.

A few hours passed and my Dad asked me if I had seen his vase. After a brief discussion and a few choice words on his part, I went dumpster diving. By this time, however, it was dark and the vase was well at the bottom of the dumpster and I spent a good part of the rest of the evening going through trash looking for a hidden treasure.

It seems to me that this how a lot of people approach their spiritual life. They dig in the dark through a lot of trash looking for a hidden, secret treasure which will make all the difference in their life. Seven of the ten bestselling non-fiction books this month deal with reforming our spirit. Try googling the word “religion” on your computer and up pops 254 million websites, or almost one for every man, woman, and child in this country. You cannot stand in the supermarket check-out line without our deep desire to live out our spiritual side smacking us in the face. Check out these “spiritual” headlines from some supermarket tabloids:

“Exclusive Report: Inside the Gates of Hell; How to Avoid Damnation, Tricks the Devil Doesn’t Know”¹

“Heal-AThon Miracles: For the 12th Year Examiner Psychic Healer Tony Leggett’s Global Prayer Appeal Has Spread Health, Wealth, Happiness, Goodwill and Love Around The World.”²

“Is The Antichrist Running for the White House?
1,500 Year Old Prophecy Says It’s Possible!”³

We are so spiritually hungry. And so must of us dig desperately through a mountain of trash to discover what we must do to discover a hidden spiritual treasure—the secret which will unlock heaven on earth.

And at first glance that is how we are tempted to understand these two parables this morning. In the middle of a whole series of parables, Jesus told two back-to-back to help explain how precious is the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus first said the kingdom of heaven is like a man who discovered, quite by accident, a treasure which had been hidden in a field. He then reburied the treasure and sold all that he had to purchase that field. He then told a story about a pearl merchant, a man who made his living buying and selling pearls. This man, in the execution of his business, came across one pearl of great value, a pearl of great price. He was so captivated, so enraptured by this pearl, that he sold all that he had and bought it.

Jesus said that this is what the kingdom of heaven is like. The kingdom of heaven is so great, so amazingly wonderful, so fantastic and fanciful, so marvelous and miraculous, so amazing and astounding, that it is worth giving up everything for just a taste of it.

But what is the Kingdom of Heaven? Do we have to wait until we die or until the end of all history to experience it? To experience the full measure of heaven we do. But there are little snippets, previews of a coming attraction, available to us on occasion. N.T. Wright says that the Kingdom of Heaven “is God’s future arriving on earth, heaven breaking into this world.”⁴

What does it mean for heaven to break into this world? Heaven breaking into the world, I believe, is one of the times when we see God reaching into our daily lives to change our circumstances by miraculous means. The Kingdom of Heaven simply means the tangible presence of God among human beings. Jesus Christ was a walking example of this—the very living embodiment of the Kingdom of

Heaven. But I think we also see God breaking into our world in smaller, also very important ways to impact our lives and change our destiny. Many of us can name examples from our very own lives. I was talking with someone just this week about one of those strange coincidences in life, too strange to simply happen by random chance. It had to be God reaching into their life to change the circumstances of their life by miraculous means. In desperation he had called someone to seek their counsel on a very particular issue. That person happened to be sitting next to someone they had just met on the airplane who had written a book on that very subject.

The breaking of heaven into this world can also be the recovery from an illness which the doctors simply cannot explain. There is the accident which should have caused grave injury from which we escaped with only a scratch. A moment with a loved one so beautiful it is forever engraved onto our soul. A worship service or Sunday School class which leaves a mark upon us for the rest of our life or the word from a stranger which sums up exactly what we were feeling but to which we could never put words, and tells us exactly how to proceed. This is the Kingdom of Heaven—God breaking into this world. These are moments in time which also echo throughout eternity. This is paradise encountering the profane, the holy punching through to the here and now, leaving the latter forever changed. *Luke 8:1* tells us that the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven in our lives is always good news.

This breaking in of heaven into our sinful and broken world is that hidden treasure, that secret for which we are willing to dig through mountains of trash in order to receive. I have known people who have been carried in their life for decades by the gossamer memory of one of these moments. And at first glance it appears that this parable teaches us that indeed, the kingdom of heaven is something hidden—a pearl or a treasure—over which we stumble one day or that we find through diligent searching—but that its discovery and recovery is up to us.

So, what I would like to do this morning is give you the secret of life. I am a trained theologian with a number of higher degrees in theology and one in progress. My study has many leather bound books

and smells of rich mahogany. I have spent a lifetime studying and researching the ancient texts and the deep wisdom of God. And although my professional guild may disenfranchise me for what I am about to impart to you, and monks of an ancient order sworn to protect the secret may bash down our doors at any minute and carry me away, I nevertheless feel compelled to lay this great treasure at your feet, to let you know the grand secret which can bring about the kingdom of heaven in your life.

The secret is...there is no secret. We cannot call heaven down to earth. We cannot satisfy our spiritual hunger through thinking positive thoughts, channeling our good energy, sleeping with consecrated rocks under our pillow, wearing a sacred amulet, examining the movements of the stars, probing the ancient texts, suffering for the deep wisdom of God, walking and seeking to the ends of the earth like David Carradine in Kung Fu, to discover that one piece of spiritual truth which makes all the difference.

I don't think the parable this morning is about us finding the Kingdom of Heaven. It's about the King finding us. It's about God saving us. The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, it is a pearl of singular value for which everything is given up. The Gospel teaches that you are God's pearl of great price. You are God's treasure hidden in a field for which Jesus Christ gave up everything.

John 15:13 "Greater love has no one than this that someone lays down his life for his friends."

2 Corinthians 8:9 "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor..."

John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son."

The great story of the history of this world is its Creator's great, undying love for even His sinful and wayward children, that even in our rebellion against Him, we remain His great treasure—His pearl of great price for which He sacrificed everything in order to obtain. Whether or not we or anyone else

believe ourselves to be a treasure is immaterial. God does and that fact is all that matters.

Jen and I have been trying to sell her car this weekend. We bought a newer, baby-friendly car about a week ago and so we are trying to sell her car through the newspaper. The experience of writing up an ad and trying to market your car is always interesting. You, of course, want to be honest but you also want to make sure you get at least a fair price. We had her car detailed, waxed, the engine cleaned, the tires scrubbed,—we did everything we could do to present her sporty 1999 Honda Civic, with a CD player, sunroof, 5 speed, and cold, cold air in the best possible light, hoping that we could get someone to part with a chunk of money to take it home.

This is how it goes for us so often in life, except it is much more personal. We want to show ourselves in the best possible light when we know we are going to be judged. We know where all the blemishes are. We know exactly just how this particular model falls short and what kind of reliability and dependability it has. We know about the wrecks, the rough treatment, the lack of regular maintenance. And we may find ourselves hoping that anyone taking a look at us does not look too close lest they learn the real story.

But the truth is that God knows our story, our entire story, He has done His research. *Psalm 139:1-5 "O LORD, you have searched me and known me!² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar.³ You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.⁵ You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me."* God knows our thoughts. God knows our words before they are on our tongue. God knows our ways so well that He knows precisely what we are going to do before we do it. God goes before us clearing our path and He walks behind us cleaning up our mistakes. And we remain His treasure, His pearl of great price.

There is no secret here. Jesus Christ did not live and die in a closet. His coming into this earth was

announced by angels and attended by kings. He died on a mountain in the most public form of execution the world has ever known. His last command to His disciples was, “*Tell everyone you meet my story. Take it to the four corners of the earth.*” One of the most popular songs the world has ever known is “Jesus Loves Me.” There is no secret here. It is God’s love for us that causes heaven to break into this earth—nothing else. It is only by the grace of God that we will ever know the Kingdom of Heaven.

So, if there is no secret, if the truth upon which the world spins is really as simple as *Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so*, why do so many of us have such a hard time living it? Why do we spend so much time in the dark digging through the trash to find a hidden treasure? Quite simply, most of us don’t realize the treasure we are and because of that we don’t realize the treasure we carry, the pearl of great price which God has hidden within us. We haven’t stopped to really consider the implications of the fact that Jesus Christ lives within us and the very fact that His life is now fused with our life means that we too are a walking Kingdom of Heaven, carrying—or perhaps more accurately being carried by—the Lord of Lords and King of Kings with us wherever we go. Jesus Christ’s last words on earth were, “*I am with you always.*”

What a wonderful treasure, what a pearl of great price we carry within us!

Lieutenant Colonel Brian Birdwell was in the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, when American Airlines, Flight 77, slammed into it. When the plane hit, Birdwell was thrown to the ground and engulfed in flames. Of the burns that consumed 60 percent of his body, nearly half were third degree, resulting in the need for 30-plus operations. Yet even in the midst of that horror, Brian Birdwell knew that He was God’s treasure for whom God gave everything and that God was with Him always:

There are those who in going through turmoil and chaos demand to know *Why me, God?* They get caught up in the question, *How did you let this happen, God? Where were you?*

People say, “*Where was God on September 11?*” He was in Corridor 4 picking up Brian, knocking him under the sprinkler so the fire would go out, and then picking him up and hauling him down that hallway to get to the people God had picked to be in that spot at that moment to save him. God *was* there.

And miracles did take place—not only in our story but in many others that took place on 9/11. God placed every person exactly where they needed to be for Brian to escape the Pentagon, to get immediate care, and to live. God was most definitely there—in the Pentagon, in Georgetown, in Washington Hospital Center in the ICU and step-down, and in every part of Brian’s healing process.

And he’s also most definitely in the room with you and me.⁵

What is the secret of life? To know that I am God’s treasure for which He gave everything, and that I carry the treasure of His Son with me wherever I go.

¹ *Weekly World News*, August 6, 2007: cover.

² *National Examiner*, August 6, 2007: p.14.

³ *Sun*, August 6, 2007: p. 25.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (San Francisco, Harper Collins: 2006) p. 100.

⁵ Brian and Mel Birdwell with Ginger Kolbaba, *A Soldier’s Story of 9-11: Refined by Fire* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002) p. 204-206.