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“Ask something of me and I will give it to you” (1 Kings 3:5).

Seventeenth Sunday of the Year

1 Kgs 3:5, 7-12; Ps 119; Rom 8:28-30; Matt 13:44-52

Jesus’ parables give us an idea of his audience. The simple, everyday topics suggest he was speaking to peasant day laborers, fishing families and ordinary people who might gather on the beach near the Sea of Galilee after a long day’s work to listen to a good storyteller. The crowds were large enough that Jesus spoke from a boat just offshore, where the acoustics were good for listening against a calm early evening sky and the sound of the gulls.

Though the parables seem simple, some of them not more than a sentence or two, they were engaging and memorable. And like the metaphors they held, they involved some mental digging or contained questions like fishhooks that caught their listeners’ imaginations and invited them to think more deeply, even dream a bit.

Treasure stories have always been part of folklore. Start a conversation about a winning lottery ticket and you will have listeners. A hidden treasure found by a simple laborer was a game changer. Sudden riches opened the future in a whole new way. In Jesus’ time, such stories had some basis. Because the region was a land bridge between Asia and Africa, frequent invading armies had dwellers rushing to hide their valuables in the ground. Clay pots with coins buried in fields could be unearthed years later.

Jesus compares such treasure to the Kingdom of God, and here the story becomes interesting. To claim the treasure, the digger, who is working on someone else's land, quickly conceals the find, goes and sells everything he owns and with some sleight of hand and a straight face convinces the owner to sell him the field. His joy has cost him everything, even his ethics. What kind of treasure is this Kingdom of God if it asks you to surrender your total self, even your honor, to possess it?

The pearl merchant likewise gives up his livelihood as a trader for profit and resale in order to possess a single pearl for its beauty and perfection alone. We think of the famous quote from Dostoevsky's novel, *The Idiot*, that "beauty will save the world." Prince Myskin, an epileptic, has seen a painting of the dead Christ in the tomb and wonders if such a sight could destroy his faith. In fact, the love implied in that death was the beauty capable of saving the world.

Again, how is the Kingdom of God so precious that it is worth everything else? Had we been in the crowd listening to Jesus, it might have struck us, as it obviously did the first disciples, that the person telling the parable was the treasure worth selling everything or the pearl of great price so beautiful it changes life irretrievably. We must follow him and have this love that flows from his mind and heart in these little parables. Having met him, our lives are never the same.

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