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 Sept 10, 2023
 Rally Day

**Parables and the Kingdom of God
 Matthew 13:44-45**

⁴⁴ "The kingdom of heaven is like **treasure** hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and **buys that field**.

⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is **like a merchant in search of fine pearls**; ⁴⁶ on finding **one pearl of great value**, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

.....

We've just heard **two of Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God**.

And if we pay attention to Jesus' teaching and preaching throughout the Gospels, we see him announcing a new kingdom here on earth.

This kingdom comes **with him....but is not fully realized** until eternal life.

So, Jesus uses **parables** as a special kind of storytelling----
 To describe that kingdom.

But what is a parable?

Some see it as an **allegory**.

Or a **metaphor**.

But the truth is, **a parable is different**.

It's not necessarily an **allegory**—

where there's an external key to understand the story.

We see allegories a lot in **movies**.

For example, **Avatar**--- is an allegory for imperialism; and how it can destroy indigenous cultures and the environment.

Or **The Truman Show**--- is an allegory for reality TV obsession; and how real people can be dehumanized by it.

We see allegories in **literature** like *Lord of the Flies*—an allegory for social structure; and how humans can conceal their savage ways.

Or, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* – a religious allegory for the betrayal of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' parables are similar to allegories,
But they are **more than that** too.

Parables are also not just **metaphors**— where each thing 'stands for' something else.

Like, the book *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

It has a character named Christian—who is what his name describes, and the Blind Pilgrims—people who are losing their way spiritually.

Parables are DEEPER than allegory or metaphor—
even though we often try to distill them down to that.

Theologian Alyce McKenzie says that

a parable is a short narrative fiction that makes us evaluate our lives.

Alyce McKenzie, *The Parables for Today*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2007, pg. 22.

What do you think of that?

What if parables make us evaluate our lives—
because they have **so many layers, meanings, and applications?**

McKenzie says that there are 5 Qualities of a Parable of Jesus:

1. **Realistic, but Strange**—with odd or exaggerated experience
2. **Paradoxical**—for instance, a negative as a positive
3. **Metaphorical**—by equating 2 strange things
4. **Challenging**--us to think differently
5. **Open-Ended**—bringing up far more questions than answers

Alyce McKenzie, *The Parables for Today*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2007, pg. 25.

Why do we care about the definition of a parable?

Because **Jesus used parables** to teach his disciples and followers.

In Matthew 13:3 it says that Jesus *he told them many things in parables,*

And in 13:11-13 it says: ¹⁰ *Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”* ¹¹ *He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets^[b] of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.* ¹² *For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.* ¹³ ***The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’***

Jesus knew that ***parables are more nuanced***, and some would understand, but some would not perceive.

In the New Testament, there are about ***40 parables*** of Jesus. ***Matthew, Mark and Luke*** have many of the same stories, But each Gospel has some that are unique. And the ***Gospel of John*** does NOT contain parables per se, but rather “I Am” statements about Jesus’ identity and mission.

Professor Amy-Jill Levine says that Jesus’ parables are really ***the ‘GENIUS’ of his teaching.***

Amy Jill-Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, HarperOne: NY, 2014, Pg. 4

Why?

Because Jesus’ first century audience would have been familiar with this kind of storytelling, found in many different traditions and religions.

They are found in the Old Testament, like the famous story that the prophet Nathan tells to King David, to convict him of his affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband.

Rabbis at the time of Jesus would use parables, but Jesus took it to a ***whole new level***—using hyperbole and exaggeration, strange and interesting details, leading to layer after layer of interpretation.

Unfortunately, throughout history, parables have been interpreted as ***simple allegories, metaphors, or moral lessons.***

And that kind of simple interpretation ***ignores the context*** of these stories.

So, we need to ask: ***What did the first audience hear?***
And how does it translate for our lives today?

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus uses parables to explain the kingdom of God, or what he calls the ***kingdom of heaven***.

And 'the kingdom' is a term for the ***activity of God in the world***—but a realm that we participate in.

Each parable Jesus told is designed to ***help us see the world in a different way***.

Consider the two parables about the treasure and the pearl.

We could read these like simple allegories or metaphors.

We could decide that the ***treasure in the field and the greatest pearl is the kingdom of God, and we are seeking that treasure and finding that pearl***.

And in order to get the kingdom, we need to ***give up everything*** to get it.

Ok, that makes sense, sort of.

Or, ***Jesus is the one seeking and we are the treasure or the pearl***, and he had to give up everything, even his own life on the cross, to get us. That makes sense too, sort of.

Either way the parables are about the ***cost or sacrifice of discipleship***.

And there is truth in these interpretations.

There ***IS a high cost*** to discipleship.

But what if these little stories, have ***deeper, more nuanced*** meaning?

What if there are layers of meaning and power—that can truly transform our lives?

And what if ***simplistic interpretations lead us to misunderstand Jesus?***

For instance—is the kingdom something we just GET?

And---the first parable says

that the kingdom of heaven is ***like a treasure***,

but in the second parable it says that the kingdom of heaven is ***like a merchant*** in search of pearls.

What does it mean to say that the ***kingdom is like a treasure?***

What do we do with treasure in our lives?

And isn't it true that ***treasure is different*** for different people?

What is the ***treasure of the kingdom in your life?***

And—***what if the kingdom of heaven is more than just a commodity to obtain?***

Some people see salvation as a commodity to get---they want to be saved---

So they can avoid going to hell!

But isn't faith in Christ about so much more than that??

What if the kingdom is about ***transformation, and a changed life?***

What if finding the kingdom is a ***process*** that changes who we are?

Notice the one seeking finds JOY Jesus says!

What if that's the story Jesus is telling about the merchant?

What if like the merchant who finds that greatest pearl, and sells all to buy it,
we too discover that ***following Christ is life-changing?***

Notice how the ***merchant's life is changed—***

he starts as a merchant searching for fine pearls,

but when he finds the one pearl of great value,

he stops his search!

He has a new life! He's a new person!

How does that speak to US today? Don't we want new life in Christ?

What are ***YOU*** searching for, right now?

More friends? More popularity?

Aren't we usually searching for more of something?

More money, education, security, status?

What if life in Christ ***helps us stop that endless searching?***

What if it's like that greatest pearl?

Or the treasure in the field?

And it changes our whole way of living?

The characters in these parables are ***"all in"***, aren't they?

Are we "all in"? When it comes to our faith and walk with Christ?

You know, in the ***Gospel of Matthew chapter 6,***

Jesus tells his followers to not worry about anything,
 But instead, ***SEEK FIRST the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
 And all these things will be added unto you as well. Matt 6:33.***

WHAT IS that kingdom we are supposed to seek?

Maybe this is where ***God speaks to us in different ways.***
 Could it be that seeking the kingdom of God is different, for different people?
 Not that Jesus is different,
 but that our relationship with him leads to ***different transformations,***
 different ***priorities,***
 different ***ways of living.***

Now—some would argue with me right here.
 Some Christians say that there is ***only ONE way*** to read Scripture,
 Only one way to vote,
 Only one way to love,
 Only one way to have a family,
 And the list goes on and on....

But ***Presbyterians have a rich history of seeing beyond the black and white,***
 Of seeing the many different colors of Scripture and life with Jesus.
 We believe that there are different ways of following Jesus Christ—
the point is TO FOLLOW Jesus Christ!
 So we are called to think for ourselves,
 and consider the ways that the Bible applies to our individual lives,
 and to our greater community.
 We are called to think beyond ourselves, or just ***'me', to consider the 'we'.***

In fact, some have pointed out that the term ***"kingdom of God"***
 (which can evoke images of a patriarchal kingship)
 could also be described as the ***"kin-dom"*** of God,
 where we are all kin and part of the community of faith, brothers and sisters.

Some have called the kingdom of God, ***the beloved community***—
 a term often used by Martin Luther King, Jr.

For Dr. King, ***The Beloved Community*** was a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth, and poverty, hunger and homelessness are not tolerated. Racism and all forms of discrimination, are replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of community, and disputes are resolved by peace. Love and trust triumph over fear and hatred. Peace and justice prevail over war and conflict.

<https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>

One of the reasons we are studying Jesus' parables in Matthew—
Is to get a better understanding of the beloved community.

To see the ***power of following Jesus,***
and ***how to seek the kingdom he brought into this world.***

Each week we pray in the Lord's Prayer:

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven....

And we need to know what we are praying for!

What is that kingdom?

How can we be a part of it, on earth,
not just waiting for it someday in heaven?

I challenge you—to ask God this week—show me the kingdom!

In her book, *Short Stories by Jesus*,

Professor Amy-Jill Levine tells about leading a Bible study for Death row inmates,
studying these parables.

And you know what the ***prisoners saw as the greatest pearl?***

One of them said, it's **Freedom.**

Another responded, it's **Safety.**

They know what a hidden treasure or a greatest pearl really is, you know?

The question is, ***what are we seeking?***

And ***what would we do to obtain it?***

Where is the kingdom of God in our midst?

Maybe Jesus is asking us—

What are your priorities?

What do you seek?

What do you keep? Or discard?

What is worth your attention, your time, and ultimately, your life?

One of the best things about my job is ***hearing how God calls each of you---***
to step out in faith. And the JOY it brings!

To serve, to stand up, to listen, to care.

And I see the kingdom of God right here----

Where so many saints live out their faith—

without any applause, fanfare, or recognition.

They are buying groceries for a shut-in,

Or delivering communion to the sick.

They are visiting the homebound, or bringing gifts for a new baby,

they are calling those who are sad, or eating with those who are struggling.

They are teaching kids, painting classrooms, stacking food at the pantry, or
handing out assistance to those in need.

They are seeking first the kingdom of God.

May we all seek that treasure, that greatest pearl,

The kingdom of God in our lives, and in our community.

And for the gift of the kingdom, all God's people can say together, Amen.