

Introductory

This material is unique to Matthew. It is not appointed to be read on any Sunday in the TLH one-year lectionary. It is the reading appointed for Pentecost 10A in LW. The material consists of four stories involving a treasure, a pearl, a net, and a householder. Held in common by the first three is that all of them involve things that are found.

That none of those things found had actually been *lost* distinguishes them from stories about things that are first lost, and then found, like the three things in the 15th chapter of Luke. These four stories are all very short, as far as stories go. The first two consist of only one sentence each – fairly long sentences, to be sure – and yet they are all stories.

A story is not a story because of its length, but because a story is being told. Ernest Hemingway, the master of the short story, was once asked to tell a story using six words or fewer. He quickly responded, “Baby Shoes. For Sale. Never Worn.” That’s a story. It’s a pretty short story, but it is a story. “God created, Man sinned, Jesus saves.”

If we understand simile to be a comparison using “like” or “as,” and a parable to be an extended simile, then we understand that a parable is a figure of speech comparing one or more things to another. In all four of these stories, Jesus is comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to things, stating very clearly, that “the Kingdom of Heaven is like...”

That phrase is used thirty-one times by Matthew. Twelve of those thirty-one occurrences are in the context of introducing a simile or a parable. The parables we have been looking at and the last one in this reading have more than one point of comparison and are, by definition, allegories. Allegorize, but allegorize responsibly, like Jesus does.

One of the first questions confronting the preacher when dealing with this reading is whether to preach on all four parables, or to preach on only one or two of them. To preach on only one of the parables would seem to be simpler, and presumably easier, but if the exegetical/homiletical task is to “exhaust the text,” then what’s the preacher to do?

First of all, nobody has ever yelled at me on the way out of church for my failure to exhaust the text. To the novice I would recommend dealing with one of the four, and maybe bringing in the other three to help explain things said about that one. As for me, I’ve been doing this for thirty-eight years, and I’m better at it now than I used to be.

I have generally focused on the first two because they are the most well-known and easily understood by the exegete and by the hearer. I have then exhausted the text by bringing in The Nets and then explaining the transition in v. 51 to the last parable, The Householder, which is generally not as well-known, but it is important.

Textual Notes

44. When we hear the words “Ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν – the Kingdom of heaven is like,” we expect to hear a parable, and here we do. He will use that phrase again in the next verse, and again in the verse after that to introduce three extended similes, which is what a parable is. It’s also an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

The Kingdom is compared to “θησαυρῷ κεκρυμμένῳ ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ - a treasure having been hidden in a field.” The verb is a perfect participle; it was deliberately done, and the middle voice means that the hider of the treasure was acting in his best interests when he did what he did. The word translated “treasure” means any form of valuable assets.

In fact, a better translation might be that the man hid his assets. People understand assets, and when they think of treasure they think of pirates, yarr... These days, when thinking of a place for securing valuable things, we would think of things like a bank, a safe, a safe deposit box, under your mattress, or maybe in some cases a hole in the ground.

We use the lock routinely and without even thinking about it secure such valuables as our cars, our houses, our bikes, et al. The lock as we know it is a relatively new invention, and newly available to the common man. Locks with keys have been around for only a couple of hundred years, and combination locks are an even more recent development.

Jesus’ time, there were bankers, individuals or groups of people who would borrow and lend money, but there were no banks as we know banks; a secure place with a vault places to keep your valuables. Absent safes and safe deposit boxes, a hole in the ground was the most common and common-sense place for the valuables of the common man.

Barclay says,

In the ancient world there were banks, but not banks such as ordinary people could use. Ordinary people used the ground as the safest place to keep their most cherished belongings. In the parable of the talents the worthless servant hid his talent in the ground, lest he should lose it (*Matthew* 25: 25). There was a rabbinic saying that there was only one safe repository for money – the earth (p. 84).

The situation described by Jesus here was typical, and the person who put that treasure into that hole no doubt planned to come back for it at some time. The story is not about the man who buried the treasure. The story is about the hole in the ground, the treasure contained there, the man who found it, and about that man’s actions upon finding it.

The modern reader might hear this story and think that the man who finds the buried assets ought to go and try to find the owner. Instead, “ὃν εὐρὼν ἄνθρωπος ἔκρυψεν, καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς χαρᾶς αὐτοῦ ὑπάγει καὶ πωλεῖ ὅσα ἔχει καὶ ἀγοράζει τὸν ἀγρὸν ἐκεῖνον – which a man found and covered up, and in his joy goes and sells all he has and buys that field.”

Using descriptive, rather than prescriptive language, the story is a commentary on what a person would do if he were out deliberately digging for other peoples’ valuables. When’s the last time *you* went over to your neighbor’s land with a shovel, and why would you go over there to dig if you’re not looking for something like this? I have never done that.

The parable is talking about what a person *would do*, not about what a Christian *should do*. Most would do just what this man does, and very few would do what many would think a good Christian would do. The Parable of the Shrewd Steward is not telling Christians that they *should* be like him, but *descriptively* pointing out how people *do* act.

Having said that, Barclay, who says that the man who found the treasure “was going about his daily business” of digging for treasure, makes a good case that the man was not doing anything illegal, or for that matter necessarily immoral in doing what he did. The playground rule, “finders keepers, losers weepers,” applied to Jews in the time of Jesus.

Barclay says that, “in regard to hidden treasure Jewish Rabbinic law was quite clear: ‘What finds belong to the finder, and what finds must one cause to be proclaimed? These finds belong to the finder – if a man finds scattered fruit, scattered money...these belong to the finder.’ In point of fact, this man had a prior right to what he had found.”

A few years back, I bought a first edition of *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand at a garage sale for 25 cents. That book is now for sale by me on Amazon.com for \$150. I think that some people would tell me that I should have told the seller, especially since I’m a pastor, that the book was worth more than 25 cents. Finders keepers, losers weepers.

The man found what he found, then he covered it back up, presumably so that nobody else – including the owner – would know of his discovery. To summarize; the treasure is concealed by one unnamed man, and then the treasure is found by another man, and that other man then conceals the treasure again, presumably by reburying it in the same spot.

Now that the treasure has been re-secured in the ground, three verbs are used to describe three actions. The man “went,” and he “sold,” and he “bought.” All three of those verbs are present active indicatives. There is nothing passive about any of those these actions. They are all, in fact, very calculating, and his actions reveal a man with a deliberate plan.

He went from that place, and you sort of get the idea that at that point he dug up any of his own assets that he had buried in his own back yard, called in any and all markers and loans, gathered up and sold books on Amazon and everything else on ebay, and if he would have had credit cards he would have maxed out the cash advance on each of them.

We are further told that it is out of “χαράς – joy”, a common NT word, that he takes these steps to secure the treasure that remains hidden in the field. The word is another indication that this parable is about God finding us. How do you feel when you find something valuable, or even a twenty dollar bill laying on the sidewalk?

45. Moving now from valuable things deliberately placed into the ground, we delve into the valuables found in nature, “Πάλιν ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἐμπόρῳ ζητοῦντι καλοῦς μαργαρίτας – again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls,” and we think of Mike and Frank from *American Pickers on History*.

If we are made uncomfortable – even though we should not be – by the actions of the treasure-hunter, we have no such qualms about this man. He is said to have been a “merchant,” we would probably call him a “trader,” and as has always been the case wherever there are merchants and traders, they are very good at making money.

This man seems to be involved in buying and selling fine jewels, a vocation that most would see as respectable. Included among numerous fine jewels then, as well as today, is the pearl. He is said here to be “ζητούντι,” a present active participle, telling us that he is moving about, continually searching for “καλοῦς μαργαρίτας – beautiful pearls.”

Mike and Frank “scour the country” for stuff that they can buy and then sell for more than they paid for it. It’s their vocation, their business, and they have done very well at it, even before *Pickers*. Some picks are better than other picks, and they’re always looking for the “honey pot,” the big score. That’s what the trader in the story is looking for.

46. And he makes the big score, “εὕρων δὲ ἓνα πολύτιμον μαργαρίτην – having found one very valuable pearl,” and if it’s valuable enough, only one will do. The adjective “πολύτιμον – great” is a comparative, not a superlative, but does “ἓνα – one” cause it to function here as a superlative, “the biggest pearl,” or “the mother of all pearls.”

Πολύτιμον occurs only three times in the NT, and neither of the other two occurrences is preceded by ἓνα, nor is ἓνα found preceding πολύτιμον in the few occurrences of cited extra-biblical literature in resources at my disposal (MM and BAG). At any rate, we get the point; whether it was a very big or the biggest pearl; it was a nice honey pot.

He found what he was looking for, and what happens next is described by three verbs, whose forms clearly tell us the timing and chronology of his actions. He has found what he was looking for, but it belongs to somebody else, so “ἀπελθὼν πέπρακεν πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν καὶ ἠγόρασεν αὐτόν – going away, he sold all that he had and bought it.”

The finding and going away are aorist active participles, the selling is in the perfect tense, and the buying is in the aorist. Having found that pearl, and having departed, then having sold all that he had in the same way as had the treasure-hunter, the man then bought the pearl. Also like the treasure-hunter, his actions are deliberate and to increase his assets.

After the first episode of *Pickers*, the Internet was filled with vitriol about the how the Pickers had ripped off that old man. On the episode in question they had purchased a bicycle from the man, and then did what they do; they resold it for a pretty good profit. The vitriol was unwarranted. People have been doing that from the beginning.

From horses to baseball cards to stocks, people have been doing what they do, and you can maybe criticize me and the man in the first scenario for not telling the owner of a book or a field that they had something valuable, but you can't criticize the Pickers or the merchant in the second scenario for engaging in very up-front business practices.

47. Finally, “Πάλιν ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν σαγήνη – again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a net.” The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net, not like a fisherman. The word translated “net” and sometimes “dragnet” is σαγήνη. It is not a common word, not the one commonly used for net, and it is a hapax legomena (only occurs once) in the NT.

MM describes it as, “a large ‘drag-net’ (Mt 13: 47), as distinguished from the smaller circular (net)... (it is) generally worked by two boats (cf. Lk 5:7), which separate and then draw it in a sweep to shore.” The smaller nets are more targeted, and this larger net will catch a lot of fish, which will then be sorted onboard, like they do on *Deadliest Catch*.

The dragnet “βληθείση εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ ἐκ παντὸς γένους συναγαγούση – having been cast into the sea and having gathered every kind” of fish. In the first two stories, men are getting stuff that had belonged to somebody else. In this third story the net is getting stuff that really belongs to nobody, but it might be said to belong to everybody.

The net is simply and in a random fashion harvesting what is there for the taking, pulling different kinds of fish and other things out of the sea. In this case, the net gathers “παντός γένους – every kind” of sea creature. The word indicates what we would call different “species” of fish, which is the norm in any large body of water.

48. Having done that, speaking of the net, “ἦν ὅτε ἐπληρώθη ἀναβιβάσαντες ἐπὶ τὸν αἰγιαλὸν καὶ καθίσαντες συνέλεξαν τὰ καλὰ εἰς ἄγην – which when it was full, drawing (it) up onto the shore, having sat down, they collected the good into containers, and they cast away the bad.” The good and useful are kept. The bad and not useful are put back.

Several actions are described here by the use of aorist participles, meaning that those things all happened before the main thing, and they were leading up to the main thing, which main thing is described by using two aorist active verbs; they “gathered” the good into the boat, and they “threw away” the bad, back into the sea.

While fewer Americans actually engage in fishing than used to, yet because of television shows like *Deadliest Catch*, *Swords: Life on the Line*, *Tuna Cowboys*, and *Swamp People*, to name just a few, some Americans may actually know more about various actual types of fishing than ever before. I don't fish much, but I know a lot about fishing.

The catch brought in by the drag-net is like that of the crab pots in *Deadliest Catch*, the hooks on *Swords*, and the nets on *Cowboys* in that those three all haul in *different* types of sea life, along with what they're trying to catch. To compare and contrast, in the case of *Swamp People*, who use rancid chicken for bait, you either hook a gator or nothing.

49. Following the description of separating good catch from bad catch, a process that is part and parcel of fishing with a net, Jesus goes apocalyptic on us, using the simile of the net as a metaphor for what is going to happen “συντελεία του αἰῶνος – at the end of the age.” He makes clear what He meant earlier, talking about “good” fish and “bad” fish.

He says that “ἐξελεύσονται οἱ ἄγγελοι καὶ ἀφοριοῦσιν τοὺς πονηροὺς ἐκ μέσου τῶν δικαίων – the angels will go out and will remove the wicked from the midst of the righteous.” The “righteous” are the Christians, and the “wicked” are everybody else, but they are not going to be thrown back into the sea, where they can continue on with life.

50. The angels are the subject, “καὶ βαλοῦσιν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν κάμινον τοῦ πυρός· ἐκεῖ ἔσται ὁ κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὁ βρυγμὸς τῶν ὀδόντων – and they will cast them into the furnace of fire, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The word “Κάμινος – furnace, occurs four times in the NT, twice each in Matthew and Revelation.

Three of those times, including here, judgment is indicated, and one time a place of refining or purification. If the Law is supposed to condemn, and it is, and if hell is a place of suffering beyond imagination, and it is, then there is perhaps no better imagery than that of a fiery furnace to communicate the horrors that await those who reject Christ.

We can create pathos in our listeners, and make them *feel* those pangs of hell, by talking about fire. Everybody has burned himself, on an exhaust manifold, or a frying pan, or any of a number of hot surfaces, and you can't ever take it off. Imagine that the hurt never goes away. Imagine that the hurt lasts for an eternity, which seems unimaginable.

If we are going to create that kind of pathos in our listeners about hell, then we should do the same thing to help them *feel* the bliss of heaven. For the text “come to me you who labor...and I will give you rest,” I talked about vacations, weekends, and holidays, things that are generally good times that feel good. Jesus talks about a place of feasting.

I have talked about the Pizza Hut buffet or a thick steak and various comfort foods to help them to feel what heaven will be like. Here, if the Gospel is to mirror the Law, I might talk about heaven as the place where bad things are absent; a place where there is no fire, no pain, no sadness, none of those things that so vex us in this life on this earth.

The phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth” occurs five times in the NT, four of them in Matthew and once in Luke (The Rich Man and Lazarus). Looking at those occurrences, we note that the people who will weep and gnash, are people who, to varying degrees, should have known better, and a lot of Americans should know better.

People who saw the crash coming in 08 and did nothing about it, the man who has known about that speed trap for years and kept speeding anyway and got caught, the single girl who finds herself with child, are some examples of things that may cause people of our time to weep and gnash their teeth, saying “I knew this was going to happen...”

51. Quick question; “Συνήκατε ταῦτα πάντα – Did you understand all these things?” a reference to the entire chapter, not just the three most recently-told parables. The answer, “λέγουσιν αὐτῷ Ναί – they said to Him, ‘yes.’” I think that they probably actually in fact did understand all of those things, but for sure we know that they thought that they did.

The verb translated “understand” is a word that indicates that one has gathered information, processed that information in his brain, and it makes sense to him. That’s good to hear, because it’s why Jesus tells parables in the first place (see His words about that at the beginning of this chapter), so that Christians can better understand our religion.

52. Then Jesus goes, ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς Διὰ τοῦτο – He says to them that because of this.” Because of what? Because of the things that He has been saying, and particularly noting that He was saying those things by means of the type speaking we know as “parable.”

Then the final parable, “ἅς γραμματεὺς μαθητευθεὶς τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν ὅμοιός ἐστιν ἀνθρώπῳ οἰκοδεσπότῃ – every scribe who has been trained in the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man, a ruler of his house.” Scribes were experts in OT Law. They were most closely akin to what we would call a lawyer and we all know what that word means.

Of that scribe, who is a householder, “ὅστις ἐκβάλλει ἐκ τοῦ θησαυροῦ αὐτοῦ καινὰ καὶ παλαιά – who puts forth out of his treasure new and old.” Where have we seen that noun “θησαυρός – treasure” before?” Oh, there it is, right after “he who has ears, let him hear, when He says, “the Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field...(44)”

Jesus is the one who seeks out and finds you, the treasure, and having found you He sells all that He has, giving even His life for you. Jesus is the one who scours the earth seeking out you, the pearl of great price, and having found you, the pearl, He sells all that He has, giving even His life for you. Jesus is the one who goes fishing for you.

The house is the church, and you know that in the early days the Christians held Divine Service in houses. The rulers of the various houses are these men, the Apostles, and those who follow them in the Apostolic Office, the pastors, the rulers of the various houses of God even to this day. They have learned of Jesus, and now will teach of Him.

Some LCMS people are uncomfortable with the Pastor as “ruler,” and like almost every other word in any language, the word “ruler” can be used improperly and applied in an improper way. But it can also be used properly and in a proper way, like Jesus does here, and like the word was used regularly in the church, but the Protestants don’t like it.

As for us, I haven’t done a thorough historical study, but I’ll bet the word “rule” vacated the LCMS vocabulary about the same time as Martin Stephan was being vacated across

the Mississippi River. It continues to amaze me how events of our beginnings still impact us – for better and for worse – going on two centuries since they happened.

Gregory the Great understands what the word means, and he uses it all the time in *Pastoral Care*, the only book that should be required reading in Pastoral Practice class at any Lutheran seminary, one that thoroughly articulates the responsibilities incumbent upon one who is entrusted with the office of ruling in the house of God.

The men to whom Jesus speaks here, each of whom is seen as οἰκοδεσπότη, should be especially cognizant of their responsibility to share “his treasure.” What is this treasure? What else can it be but Jesus and the Gospel, which they, and pastors now, are to bring out and share with the members of the household, sharing both “what is new and old.”

The “new and old” is a Jewish idiom that Clarke calls “a Jewish phrase for great plenty” (www.biblos.com). Isn’t that the wonderful thing about the Gospel? There’s plenty to go around, it never runs out no matter the time or place, an inexhaustible source of forgiveness, and with forgiveness comes life, the ultimate treasure; heaven.

There are two Greek words translated “new” in the NT. One of them means “new,” and this one means “new and different.” If I had a Model T Ford and got another, new Model T Ford, that would be the common “new.” If I had a Model T Ford and got a new Toyota Rav4, that would be “new and different” and there are also connotations of “better.”

Coming towards the end of a chapter that begins with a parable, that continues with a fairly substantial explanation of why He speaks in parables, another parable and two explanations for them, then what we hear today getting towards the end of it, the thing new and different and better about the teaching of Jesus is that He speaks in parables.

We have noted that, while Jesus did not invent the parable, He took it to another level. What does that mean? It means that we would expect God – the inventor of language and story and the like – would tell earthly stories with a heavenly meaning that would be head and shoulders above anything anybody else had done, was doing, or has since done.

Given the context, there is no other way to see the meaning of this verse other than to say that Jesus wanted the “householders” to speak in parables, to tell stories. Not all the time – Jesus does not use parables all the time – but to make it a major part of your homiletical repertoire. The other thing He does is use figures of speech, so knock yourselves out.

Law/Gospel

Junk/Treasure – Before God, because of our sin, we have no worth, and are destined for the fires of hell. Yet God considers each of us to be a great treasure, and will go to great lengths to secure us to Him. His life, death, and resurrection, and the benefits that come to us by it, are the great treasure proclaimed to us in His Word.

Hell/Heaven – All will be caught up in the dragnet at the end of time. At that time will be the judgment. Sin gets us thrown into the fire. God’s grace spares us that fire. This is a similar theme as the angels separating the wheat and the darnel.

Buried/Unburied – Like the treasure, we were buried in sin until Jesus sought us out and bought us. Since He has sought us and bought us, we know that we are His treasure. There are several “buried in baptism...resurrected” figures that could be used.

Sermon Titles

The Pearl of Great Price

The Detectorist

About Finding Things

Sought and Bought

Hymns

How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds – LSB 524

One Thing’s Needful, Lord This Treasure – LSB 536

Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness – LSB 563

The non-festival time of the Church Year is a good time to sing hymns from the *Beginning of Service*, *Close of Service* and *Morning* sections of the hymnal.

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Resources

ACC – Manlio Simonetti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Matthew).
Intervarsity Press, 2002

BAG – Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Translated by
William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, University of Chicago Press, 1979

BCLY – William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*. The Westminster Press, 1975

FGG – James W. Voelz, *Fundamental Greek Grammar*. Concordia Publishing House, 1993

GBS – Jeffrey Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary, Matthew*, CPH, 2006

GND – Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*, Eerdmans, 1982

MGM – W.F. Moulton, A.S. Geden, H.K. Moulton, *A Concordance to the Greek Testament*. T & T Clark LTD., 1978

MM – James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982

ODCC – F.L. Cross, Editor, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford University Press, 1978

RNK – Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Zondervan, 1976

RSV – Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Zondervan Publishing House, 1965

SCR – David Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church*, CPH, 2004

UBD – Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Moody Press, 1977.

WP – A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Baker, 1930

VINE – W.E.Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984

WIK – www.wikipedia.com

BIB – www.biblos.com

GBO – www.greekbible.com

Digital Classics Library - www.perseus.tufts.edu

Internet Classics Library – www.classics.mit.edu

Christian Classics Ethereal Library - www.ccel.org

Project Wittenberg - www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-home.html

