

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – 6 Aug 2023

**Acts 4:32-35, 5:1-5**

32 The group of believers was one in mind and heart. None of them said that any of their belongings were their own, but they all shared with one another everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God poured rich blessings on them all. 34 There was no one in the group who was in need. Those who owned fields or houses would sell them, bring the money received from the sale, 35 and turn it over to the apostles; and the money was distributed according to the needs of the people. ... 5:1 But there was a man named Ananias, who with his wife Sapphira sold some property that belonged to them. 2 But with his wife's agreement he kept part of the money for himself and turned the rest over to the apostles. 3 Peter said to him, "Ananias, why did you let Satan take control of you and make you lie to the Holy Spirit by keeping part of the money you received for the property? 4 Before you sold the property, it belonged to you; and after you sold it, the money was yours. Why, then, did you decide to do such a thing? You have not lied to people—you have lied to God!" 5 As soon as Ananias heard this, he fell down dead.

**Matthew 13:44-46**

44 "The Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man happens to find a treasure hidden in a field. He covers it up again, and is so happy that he goes and sells everything he has, and then goes back and buys that field. 45 "Also, the Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man is looking for fine pearls, 46 and when he finds one that is unusually fine, he goes and sells everything he has, and buys that pearl.

**Focus: The kingdom of heaven: Giving up for and giving all to Christ**

**Function:** To inspire listeners to offer their best to God, and give all that they have.

We have been listening to a few parables that tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like for the past three Sundays, and we have finally arrived at the last two parables of Matthew 13, that is, the Parable of the Treasure and Parable of the Pearl. So, what have they revealed to us the kingdom of heaven is like?

In today's first parable, a man stumbled upon a treasure hidden in a field. The treasure was hidden in plain sight, and the man discovered it by chance. In the second parable, another man searched extensively for fine pearls, and at last, he found one unusually fine pearl. The former find was unintentional but the latter was broadly deliberate.

In the first parable, the man was in the field, which belonged to someone. He could be working in the field, or happened to be passing through. Whichever it was, he was minding his own agenda. And by chance, he stumbled upon the hidden treasure. While some may say he is lucky, we call him blessed and honest. This treasure must be something that he hoped to possess, hence recognising its preciousness upon finding it. So he covered it to ensure it for himself and went off to sell all his possessions to buy over the field to possess it.

On the other hand, the man in the second parable had been seeking the finest pearl. The original Greek text explicitly stated that he was a merchant. Hence, we can picture him going from store to store, shop by shop, rather than diving into the sea, hunting for fine pearls. Realistically, we may also imagine him having found and acquired several other pearls, each piece better than the previous, before finding this exquisite pearl. And probably, his knowledge and experience in earlier purchases had led him to recognise this magnificent pearl that he must sell everything to possess it, including letting go of all his earlier prized acquisitions of pearls.

If the man in the field is alluded to the Jewish people in the story's context and to people who grew up in Christian families in our present context, and if the man who found the pearl is alluded to Gentiles in the story's context and to theists in our present time who are searching for God, does that make sense to you? People who grew up in Christian families are not Christians by default for they have to discover their faith just like the man stumbled upon the treasure. And people who believe that there is God are actively searching for God, desiring to know who God is until eventually, they encounter Jesus like finding the rare pearl.

Regardless of the background, like both men in the parables, all people will be overwhelmed with great joy when they encounter Christ Jesus – the treasure or the rare pearl, and they would readily give up for and give all to Christ. Indeed, the parables highlighted the men's willingness and enthusiasm to give up everything they had to have what they had found.

Do you think it is rational for both men to do what they did, selling everything in order to obtain the treasure and pearl? Isn't that too risky?

One thing is evident to us: both men are very confident with what they have found. The treasure and pearl are certainly of far greater value than all that they had possessed, and they willingly sold everything they had to own them. So, alluding to the kingdom of heaven, these parables reveal the pricelessness of the kingdom so much that any person whose eyes are opened to recognise it will give up everything to have it.

Over the past three Sundays, we have been reminded that Jesus had brought forth the kingdom of heaven as he began his earthly ministry, preaching the good news

that the kingdom of God is at hand. Like the man in the first parable who had stumbled upon the hidden treasure, many of us have encountered the kingdom of heaven when we least expect it but immediately realise it is the treasure we have wanted all lifelong. But some of us may have been like the second man, spending much time searching, looking for something to make life meaningful, purposeful, fulfilling and hopeful. From wealth to knowledge to philosophy to religion, our pursuit in life continues until we encounter Christ and our spiritual eyes are opened to recognise the kingdom of heaven – like Gollum finally found his ‘Precious’.

Regardless of the process, more importantly, how have we been responding when we encounter Christ and recognise the gift of the kingdom of heaven? Like both men having the keen eye to recognise the treasure and pearl, is our faith in Christ fervent enough to recognise our blessing to have the kingdom of heaven and our calling to participate in it?

Have we ever experienced joy so liberating and uplifting that our life’s priorities are changed and that we become less attached to things previously vital to us? When we have joy that comes from God, our attachment to other things will be loosened, and our priorities in life will change. We will readily let our lives be changed in a way we could not foresee as God’s Spirit leads us. Would you testify to this joy and share that with others?

Rather commonly, people slip into sadness, anger, fear, despair, and more, when they hit a wall and their life falls apart in the midst of health, relationship, or financial crisis, in fact, any life crisis. Most people would struggle to stay afloat, and be drowned in sorrow or anger or despair because they are simply helpless to help themselves. Yes, we are no exception. We will also fall into the same state if we insistently refuse to let go of our tightly-clenched fists on our life and grab hold of the hand of Christ instead. Let Christ Jesus carry us through when we feel down and out, and that joy from God will sustain us, keeping us hopeful.

What are you giving up for the kingdom of heaven in following Jesus?

What are you giving to Christ?

Like the men in both parables, encountering Christ and being in the kingdom of heaven is life-transforming for us, and it is worth giving up on everything else. We get a glimpse of this in the early Church in today’s first reading.

After having encountered the risen Christ and watched him ascend to heaven, the believers were full of hope; they were one in mind and heart in building up the community. They generously and willingly contributed to the common good and no one person was in need. “Those who owned fields or houses would sell them, bring the money received from the sale, and turn it over to the apostles; and the

money was distributed according to the needs of the people.” (Acts 4:34-35)  
That is the spirit of community-mindedness in the kingdom of heaven.

But it doesn't mean we have to do the same, selling our real estate, vehicles, shares, jewellery, etc for the common good of the church. This is not to be mistaken as a practice of becoming Christ's followers. Of course, we can, and our treasurer would be very happy and doesn't have to be stressed by our finances. However, the reason for the deeds of the early disciples was to meet the financial needs of the church in caring for the widows and orphans, and the weak and sick of the community, as well as sharing meals daily.

The emphasis is again on our willingness and generosity as moved by the Holy Spirit in meeting the needs of others. The story of Ananias and Sapphira in the first reading explains this point. They also sold a piece of their property, but they kept part of the money for themselves and turned the rest over to the apostles, claiming that they were giving all the proceeds. Peter pointed out to Ananias that the proceeds from the sale were theirs to keep in the first place, and the choice was theirs of how much to give to the community. But by being dishonest, it showed that they were unwilling to give everything yet wanted to show that they were generous; hence, they attempted to deceive people and God.

We get another glimpse of the deeds of the early church in Paul's second letter to the Corinth church (2 Cor 8). Paul wrote: "Our friends, we want you to know what God's grace has accomplished in the churches in Macedonia. They have been severely tested by the troubles they went through; but their joy was so great that they were extremely generous in their giving, even though they are very poor. I can assure you that they gave as much as they could, and even more than they could. Of their own free will they begged us and pleaded for the privilege of having a part in helping God's people in Judea."

When we have the willingness to give, God accepts our gift according to what we have, not according to what we do not have. Therefore, anything that we are giving up for and giving to Christ, let us do that out of a willing heart and a committed spirit, with no holding back.

With all that has been said, the idea of giving up something often leads us to reflect upon matters in life that distract our commitment to Christ, either in our faith or our service to God or people. Similarly, in giving to Christ our divided attention, our time and gifts, we have to give up something as well. Even when we sit with someone listening to their story needs our time and attention in listening as we are drawn to care for them. Following Christ will cost us something!

Having experienced Christ and God's grace, and being in the kingdom of heaven, may we respond by earnestly giving up all things in life that will distract us from

God, and by giving to Christ our time, gifts, talents, money, love and life generously in reaching out and caring for others in need. And it is our hope that through our loving care, they may find their treasure or pearl too. To God be the glory. Amen.