

“Betting On The Kingdom”

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30 July 2017 + Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 = value in God’s realm

Treasure box. Have you ever seen one? Ever had a chance to open one? I have. In my first congregation, one elder gentleman, Sam Edwards, had a treasure trove, sort of, in the back of his dry goods store.



Mr. Edwards had inherited the storefront his uncle had started in 1914. Mr.



Edwards kept it open for decades even after commerce had dwindled to nothing. Then without any fanfare one evening in the 1960’s, Mr. Edwards simply locked the door, went home never again to open.

He left it exactly as it had been ~ everything from argyle socks to hair ribbons neatly on the shelves. Upstairs in the very back of the store were a dozen or so trunks someone had left for storage but which had never been retrieved.

Soon after I arrived as a newly minted pastor, Mr. Edwards took me on a tour of his shuttered store. Way in the back, he showed me one still unopened trunk. He had sold each of the previous ones for \$50 to anyone who was curious enough to pay good money on a gamble as to what might be inside.

He made me the same offer ~ perhaps a treasure trove of antiques or perhaps a pile of discarded clothes. I prudently declined. It turned out that this trunk was in fact filled like all the rest with only disintegrated dirty rags.



What would you do? What would you spend on a treasure trunk? Would you spend \$50 for a chance on garbage or greatness? Not me in my prudence. How about \$5? How about \$5,000?



On *Let's Make A Deal*, how much would you bid for door #3 sight unseen? It might be a sports car. It might be the goat. Prudence dictates we should weigh carefully the risk against the possibility of it being the prize.



Perhaps a better comparison is to think of this parable as *Storage Wars*, the series on the A&E channel ~ where we are buying the contents of a storage unit, not sight unseen, but we get a good look first before we make a bid.



If you knew for sure that the sports car was behind door #3 on *Let's Make A Deal*, would you go all in? What would you spend if you knew for certain on *Storage Wars* there was an invaluable treasure hidden in that unit? What does prudence dictate now?

Which is precisely Jesus' point: Jesus has given us a real opportunity to look before we leap. Over and over again Jesus has described in detail what life is like in God's realm. Jesus has even offered us an experience of life in the kingdom, as it is lived out however imperfectly in the community of followers of the Lord. As to its value being a safe bet, Jesus tells us:

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



Jesus is asking us quite simply to bet on the kingdom. Jesus assures us it is a sure bet with absolutely unshakable certainty. Jesus wants us to go all in, to bet the farm, sell everything, liquidate our assets, put the house on the market, pawn everything else and put it all down on the kingdom ~ no hedging. What a frightening thought! Prudence would counsel otherwise. Ration dictates the risks are much too great.



Do we actually believe the promised benefits are real? Each of us has to decide if we think it is a sure thing or if the kingdom of heaven is an illusion and presents an unacceptable risk. Which we choose comes down to faith.

Do we believe Jesus when he says that despite all present appearances to the contrary, the kingdom of heaven is a sure bet? Do you believe Jesus? Not just believe in Jesus, but do you really and truly believe him ~ when Jesus describes God's reign, its ecstatic joy, its justice, peace and irresistible attraction, its ultimate vindication?

Jesus' point in all his parables is that life in the kingdom is beyond reality as we know it. The insiders in the kingdom all know betting on it is in fact the surest bet we could ever make.

It is extremely hard for us earth-bound mortals to do precisely what God asks of us in these parables. Think how many times we hear in church: "Be practical. Where are we going to get the money for that?"

What would this look like in our world? Would it be like a family I heard of who was so committed to a mission project at their congregation that they took out a second mortgage on their home to pay for half of it? How many of us would, could do something like that? We hear things like that and think they must be insane. Imprudent, certainly ~ too risky, absolutely ~ building God's kingdom, we hope so, we pray so.



Who would plunk down hard-earned money for an unopened raggedly old trunk? Who would do that for door #3 sight unseen? But this is precisely Jesus' point: the kingdom is not sight unseen. We have been given more than a glimpse into God's realm. Jesus' words give a taste, more than that, a foretaste of what it means to live close to God.



Surely that person who finds a treasure in a field has looked inside and assured themselves that the box contained a true treasure worthy of their investment ~ knows with absolute certainty that it was a sure bet. They must have already tasted life in the kingdom ~ and having tasted, they desire it beyond anything else.



Jesus' parables often go beyond surprising. Jesus' parables are designed to shake out our risk-averse souls and help us to become courageous adventurers, explorers and pioneers. Kingdom insiders rejoice to place this bet. They know this wager is the surest sure thing.

* Because we have experienced life in God's new age; with all its incredible power to love, accept, forgive and reconcile; and we want others to have that same experience.

Insiders in God's realm are those of us who have had a true experience of life in God's new age, with all its incredible power to love, accept, forgive and reconcile, to bring peace both personal and universal, and we want everyone and

everything to share in that experience.

To paraphrase the tagline from the movie *Field of Dreams*: "*If we live it, they will come.*" If we at Gaithersburg Presbyterian are indeed living in God's new age, then seekers, doubters and even followers of Jesus will recognize it and be glad to come and share in that experience. On the other hand, if what we are doing seems unrelated to God's realm, we are not likely to be attractive to those hungering and thirsting for an authentic experience of kingdom life.

That is the harsh reality of Jesus' parables: they contain both promise and accountability. To underscore the importance of our making the right decision in choosing God's realm, most of Jesus' parables also contain judgment, a separation of the wheat from the weeds, the sheep from the goats, here today a separation of the edible fish from the inedible.

If we want to be God's family we need to look at everything we do as individuals and as a congregation and ask one question: "**does it serve the kingdom?**" If the answer is "no" we are wise to retire it? If the answer is "yes," well we know what to do.

Ultimately, the kingdom of God is not a possession we can gain, not a treasure trunk to add to our list, but rather it is something that grabs us, indeed possesses us. Yes, Jesus calls us to be possessed by his rule, to joyfully join his reign, to embrace gratefully God's family and to become a full participant in God's story.



Jesus calls us to stake everything we have of worldly worth, all that we are and all that we accomplish on the kingdom of God ~ believing full well that wagering on God's network is a sure and certain bet which will have a guaranteed payout of inestimable value.

¹ Brian Stoffregen "Proper 12 // Lectionary 17 A: Exegetical Notes on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52" *Gospel Notes for This Sunday* p. 6