

Matthew 13: 31-33; 44-2

(The sermon portion of worship on 7/24/2011 began with ad hoc comments about the Norway massacre and a call to prayer.)

It was the heart of summer sometime around 1960, when my family journeyed to Flat Rock, MI for something of a family reunion at my uncle's house. There must have been between 5 and ten of us cousins from the East coast and from Oregon, all visiting together in a central locale in the middle of the country. My uncle's house stood on a grassy knoll, and the acreage gave plenty of space for a treasure hunt—something my Aunt, who had been a good Sunday school teacher, knew that children enjoyed. I was ecstatic. No one ever planned neat things like this in my household for us youngsters – and the thought of wandering around with clues, and the image of an ornate and gleaming treasure at the end, dazzled my young mind.

The world can be a wondrous place, particularly for children who are learning all about the many-colored, ingenious designs of the Creation which have blessed our lives. Jesus seems to have had enthusiasm for the objects of daily life even into his adult years. He sets down his observations in the parables we have read today.

We find in this latter part of the 13th chap. of Matthew, a fellow who has noticed the ecosystem: that a large shrub comes from a very small seed and it becomes home for the birds. He seems to be a sort of natural chemist, pointing out the workings of yeast, even though yeast wasn't such a good subject for a religious person. After all, yeast was rotten stuff, and Passover, for example, a celebration of what's *unleavened*. Jesus must have been acquainted with the thrill of buried treasure and could have known something of real estate transactions.

Fascinating, that he observed the gem trade – and knew the difference between ordinary pearls and that priceless gem. You wonder if Jesus also hung around the Jewelry District, and invited those merchants to his table, along with tax collectors. Please note, by the way, that these parables --the yeast, the mustard seed, the pearl and the treasure --are said to be among those words of the Bible most authentically the words of Jesus, according to the findings by *Jesus Seminar* scholars. Now we would expect Jesus to have worldly competence in subjects like the fishing trade, coming out of Galilee as he did – or again, to have insight into how a scribes works. Yet it is quite varied subject matter that comes up today in the gospel parables.

Now Solomon, of course, was known for his knowledge. Indeed, his knowledge was important in the governance of Israel. Yet Christ had a wit, too, it seems, and a real gift of wisdom – a good mind that citing the objects of daily life and using reason to liken the workings of these objects, vocations and social settings to aspects about the nature of God’s kingdom.

Article 18 of the Augsburg Confession, our seminal document of Lutheran doctrine, quotes Augustine: *WE concede that all have a free will, for all have a natural, innate understanding and reason. ..* and the section proclaims: *this enables us to live an outwardly honorable life and to make choices among the things that reason comprehends.* It is good to have in our bedrock convictions a recognition of the common, ordinary world of civic righteousness, for indeed the world in which we live today so obviously requires that we use reason mightily. We use our wits as far as they can take us, in fact. Again, in the explanation to this article of the Confession: *Since human nature still has reason and judgment about the things that the sense can grasp, it*

also retains a choice in these things (of civil righteousness, my note) as well as the liberty and ability to achieve civil righteousness.

Even for us in the church institutions, where you might think otherwise, reason also plays an extraordinarily heavy role. An article in the recent journal *Dialogue* states: *The Lutheran church today is undergoing one of the biggest transformations in its nearly five-hundred year history. As the tradition has spread globally, diverse cultural and intellectual contexts challenge theologians to think in ways that are practically relevant for the faith life of their member churches.*¹ And we are logistically adept and technologically skilled for these cross-cultural and global endeavors.

But Article 18 of the Augsburg Confession, however, does not stop with civil righteousness. Rather, it goes on to clarify where this all fits into the life of faith, stating that *without the grace, help and activity of the Holy Spirit, we're not capable of making ourselves acceptable to God, of fearing God and believing in God with our whole hearts or of expelling inborn evil lusts from our hearts. This is accomplished by the Holy Spirit.* In the life of faith, then, things seemingly do NOT get accomplished by reason or at least by reason alone. St. Paul, in 1st Corinthians 1 says it this way: *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ..For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

¹ "Theology in the Life of the Lutheran Church," Ernest L. Simmons, *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, Vol 50, No. 2, Summer 2011. p. 118

So Lutherans approve of a heavy diet of reason. Yet in the end, it's not what matters most. We look for the true treasures, believing what matters is that God grants the grace for us to find them. Solomon, you find in our hagiography of the first lesson, prays with humility and a child-like demeanor for the wisdom of the world. God responds favorably and gives him "a wise and discerning mind" with fame, and fortune thrown in as well. But tragically, Solomon forgets to walk in those family ways of his father, King David, which he has referenced. Instead, he strikes out on his own with foreign concubines, who soon having him offer incense to Astarte and Milcom, Chemosh and the pagan god Molech. You may not know the Biblical evaluation which sometimes doesn't make it into our Church school stories. Chapter 11, vs. 4 declares that thus, Solomon's heart was NOT true to the Lord, the God of his father David, the God of his forbear in the faith, Abraham.

I've always wondered if I had grown up in the DDR – the former East Germany-- where Christians were often denied educational advancement and career opportunities, whether I would have jettisoned my Christian faith. Would I have had faith strong enough to cling to the *true treasure*? Thus far, in our land, it seems we've been able to value both realms. As Gail Ramshaw writes, *Human communities value rare metals and gems, and from this treasuring of scarce products of nature come both personal happiness and international conflict. In the lectionary, treasure is an image of a **countercultural** valuing of the things of God.* To be counter-cultural is a choice that we can make at little cost thus far.

Many have said, though, that times are changing and that we in the church in North America are in a situation somewhat like the Babylonian exile for Israel. We live in the midst of a global empire which asks us to accommodate, in essence, to pagan values. So in our desire to “make it,” or at least to live in plenty and safety, we may have to compromise our Christian values. Now the first lesson was written for the exiled Israelites, who lived under the mighty amoral Babylonians far from their familiar land, and a scribe could write this narrative of Solomon, who at least asked for wisdom – a wisdom that placed the holy relationship with God as key, as central. The gift of discernment according to the Spirit, you see, was even portable to Babylon, and useful for any of life’s experiences. Surely, the people of God exiled in Babylon could grasp this treasure and value their relationship with God above all else. Surely.

Beyond what’s available in the realm of civil righteousness and its chests of reasoning through the workings of this world, there is another surprise. It is the work of redemption that we cannot anticipate or fathom. This is God’s work going on.....the cross of Christ and its aftermath going before us. Now the pattern of Christ is generally, mostly a stumbling block to us. We pray, though, and as the wisdom of the Crucified One works in us, that God grant us a vision of a fresh way to be the church in our community today. We pray that we be grasped by the *Spirit*, the ways of whom we can barely imagine and may not predict. We pray that our treasures indeed are to be stored not in our earthy ways – for then moth and rust consume them – rather are to be stored in God-pleasing ways.

Perhaps the prayer of the treasure hunter might sound something like the sermon hymn by Bernard of Clairvaux, vs. 1:

O Jesus, joy of loving hearts, the fount of life, the light of all; from every bliss that earth imparts we turn, unfilled, to hear your call.

Or perhaps a partial hymn stanza by William Whitla, from the hymn, *Let Streams of Living Justice*

Weave our varied gifts together; knit our lives as they are spun;

*On **your** loom of time enroll us till our thread of life is run.*

O great weaver of our fabric, bind church and world in one;

Dye our texture with your radiance; light our colors with your sun.

--Rev. A. Elisabeth Aurand (supply pastor)