

5<sup>th</sup> Lent (last non-weird one before Palm, Easter, Mish)  
April 6, 2014, Boone UMC, Jason Byassee  
BBC mish moment & Erica sings, communion

### **Treasure: Everything**

Mt 13:44-46

I know this is the wrong end of the state of North Carolina for this, but I am fascinated by shipwrecks. I have entirely too many of those posters of lost ships off our coast on my walls at home and even one here at the office (Jaylynn exiled that one after she said I'd gone too far). Far from North Carolina the richest shipwreck in history lies somewhere off the coast of Sumatra.<sup>1</sup> La Flor de la Mar was a Portuguese galleon sunk in 1511, loaded with slaves, 60 tons of gold, and 200 chests full of gems—some, according to legend, the size of a fist. The Flor was never perfectly seaworthy, and here's the irony—when it was too loaded down it was especially prone to founder. Finally in a storm it did. There's a moral in there somewhere. Estimates today suggest its haul would be worth \$2.5 billion. And here's the point: an American salvage expert has apparently spent \$20 million of his own money trying to find the wreck, with no success. He argues it's the greatest unfound treasure ship in human history. And hey, if he finds 2.5 billion, 20 million will seem like a bargain.

Jesus says the kingdom of God is an unimaginable treasure, so great that those who find it sell every last thing to gain it, and then rejoice to have been so lucky. Let us stand in the presence of our king to hear his word.

*44 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. 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.*

This is the word of God for the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

I'm so excited for all that we have coming up in our church. Today is the last "normal" Sunday for a while. Next week we celebrate Palm and Passion Sunday, we'll have a procession with children waving palms and sing some of our greatest songs, as Jesus rides into Jerusalem. Then we have holy week, with footwashing on Wednesday, our Last Supper play on Holy Thursday, Seven Last Words with preachers old and new on Friday, an Easter sunrise, an Easter egg hunt, and our greatest feast of the year on Sunday. It's the resurrection, it's the reason there is a church at all. Then the week after Easter, we have our mission celebration with a world class musician and speakers you will never forget. Folks still bring up *All Sons and Daughters* and Chris Heuertz last year and the way they changed their lives. This year will be that good or better. Hang on church. We're going for a ride.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.causamerita.com/flordelamar.jpg>

The whole time we will continue to focus on our series theme of treasure. Today's emphasis is simply, *everything*. The person who finds the treasure sells *all* to buy that field.<sup>2</sup> The merchant who finds the greatest pearl sells *all* to have just that one. They give up absolutely *everything* and they rejoice to have done so. Scott Cairns, a poet I admire, says this.<sup>3</sup> We are not called to lives of comfort. But we *are* called to lives of joy. That's Lent in a nutshell. A little less comfortable and a little more joyful.

Three points for today, urgency, sacrifice, and joy.

<sup>4</sup>One, urgency. Imagine the surprise of the tenant farmer in Palestine. Working for pennies, a minor illness away from the children going hungry. Plowing a field that belongs to someone else behind an animal that belongs to someone else. You know who I mean. It's everyone who works in our service industries, not making much, but glad to be employed. A friend mentioned to a waitress at a meal recently that he'd seen her somewhere before, she said yup, we all work at multiple restaurants. Surviving is not easy, never has been. You're plowing away and then bump, plow won't go. You dig, and it's a treasure chest, more money than you've ever seen.

This happens. In Nigeria not long ago a couple of kids digging found hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash. In this country we would assume drug money. There, the banks are so corrupt it was probably somebody's life savings in the most secure place she could put it. A hole in the ground.<sup>1</sup> In Palestine of Jesus' day it was the same. Only look what happens. The tenant farmer covers up the treasure. Hides it. Goes and does whatever he has to do to buy that field. Promises everyone he'll pay them back 10-fold *that day*. And he does. Now that's not what he got out of bed that morning expecting to happen.

Can I tell you something that makes me crazy about church? Luke Edwards said it perfectly in our mission moment last week. We can make something genuinely wonderful sound morbidly depressingly boring. Even celebrations. Hey we're gonna have a party! We say. And just as fast we all yawn and rifle through the bulletin. Jesus says this is an unimaginable treasure, it makes a Portuguese galleon seem like pennies. And we barely raise our eyelids. Then Jesus says this. The one who finds it, hides it. Goes and buys the field. This is like someone who buys land knowing there's oil under it when the owner doesn't. Not entirely honest, even if it is legal, and that's not clear. And Jesus says the kingdom is like that. Weird, right?

The gospel is not a summons to yawn. The gospel is more an announcement like this. Your house is on fire. Mama is dying and won't last the day, come quickly. I think that's a black widow on your leg. Do something! Fred Buechner, great writer and preacher, tells of his conversion. He was at a bar in college. And someone said something so horrible, so blasphemous, he couldn't stand it. He ran out and *had* to find a church. Like he had to make amends to the universe for this unbearable thing his friend had said. He found a church, and looked inside through the window at the altar. And he wondered, wait, why am I doing this? There must be a God who cares about right and wrong,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://034c05c.netsolhost.com/wordpress1/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/one-pearl-of-great-price-lisa-marie-dole-skinner.jpg>

<sup>3</sup> On screen plz

<sup>4</sup> I. Surprise

holiness and sin. Maybe it's all true. It's certainly urgent. Urgent can be funny. A pastor friend of mine got a call about the benevolence fund one time. The call went like this. Reverend, Aunt Edna's on the toilet, only we ain't got any toilet paper, could you give us a little something so we can get to the store and get her some paper so somebody else can use the commode?<sup>ii</sup> Urgent. The gospel summons is like this: the greatest treasure in history is in your backyard. You just gotta dig a little.<sup>iii</sup>

With Jaylynn in South Africa my boys and I have been on a *Star Wars* kick. Used to I could quote every line in that first movie for you. A writer I admire says this about *Star Wars*: what makes the films so great is you can tell *exactly* what every character wants. To defeat the empire! Their whole lives can be dedicated to that purpose. Urgently. Our lives? Not so clear what to be urgent about. Do I want this or that? This career or that, these friends or those, this lifestyle or another? I think this is why our culture remembers World War II so positively—all Americans wanted one thing. To defeat totalitarianism. Even pacifists wanted Hitler gone. Since then in our politics it's not so clear. What do we do on health care? How do we solve the water problems of both Watauga and Ashe Counties? It's hard to be so urgent about just 1 thing. Soren Kierkegaard said purity of heart is to will one thing. But other philosophers have said to want just one thing is madness. Which is it?

Jesus says the gospel is a treasure. Give up all to get it. I would like that kind of urgency. To know exactly what you want. Wouldn't you?

<sup>5</sup>Two, sacrifice. I was meeting with someone once about church. And they said something that reminded me that they're not church people yet. Most of us in church know how to do the polite church-speak thing. *They* hadn't gotten the memo, so here's what they said. 'We like church. We want to do more with it. But we're *not* going to sacrifice. If there's something better going on that weekend we'll do *that*. Ok?' Wonderful when someone tells it to you straight. We like our religion without sacrifice.

The very word sacrifice sounds gloomy and miserable. It's the sort of word preachers use at stewardship time. I heard a speaker recently say at stewardship time a little invisible shield goes up. And everybody says "alright, fire your best stewardship sermon at me!" And it just bounces off the shield. Sacrifice is actually a beautiful thing. It might be the most beautiful thing there is. I mentioned World War II—talk to Sam Wotherspoon, Joe Coffey, any of our few remaining veterans of that war. Then talk to those who were alive but *didn't* go overseas. They kept victory gardens. Had rationed gas and coffee and sugar. They didn't love it. But they did it for a greater good—to win the war. We sacrifice all the time. Some of you are in Boone making less money so you can enjoy these magnificent schools. Parents of great athletes sacrifice so their kid can learn dance or hockey; parents of great musicians sacrifice so their child can learn flute or banjo. And you know what? That's a beautiful thing. Wouldn't have it otherwise. Grandparents don't really feel it's a sacrifice to give gifts to grandchildren, though it costs money. Sacrifice doesn't work if it's not for a greater good. In Lent we go without not to make ourselves miserable. But to remind us to hunger for God. Because God is better than *any* thing in the universe.

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<sup>5</sup> II. Sacrifice

Here's another sacrifice. Being a big deal. Jesus uses a poor farmer here. And then a merchant. If the poor farmer is like an hourly wage person or a Latino migrant worker in our day, the merchant is like a used car salesman, like your ne'er-do-well cousin who always has money but you don't know where it came from. Jesus uses lowly things to humble the lofty. Here at this church I love it when someone joins who's a big deal. We got two chancellors at Appalachian. Local politicians. Lawyers. Business owners, entrepreneurs. Professors. Artists. We got people sitting there who are world-renowned in their field but you know em by their first name. They're just normal people at church. That's wonderful. Here's the problem. It can start to look like you have to be a big deal to go here. And that hurts us. Some of you have told me you hesitated to join. You were afraid it'd look like a career move. Instead of a precious commitment of the heart. So here's what we have to do, church: we have to be sure we're in relationship to those whom the world thinks are *not* a big deal. Because they *are* a big deal to Jesus. Everybody everywhere matters in here, not just those who matter out there. One of you at the top of your field told me recently when you retire you'd love to empty trash for us. That's downward mobility, sacrifice, and it's beautiful.

In a way, you sacrifice to marry someone. You won't be marrying all the others. But you hardly notice. The disciples in Matthew meet Jesus and *immediately* leave their nets, their work, their family. A sacrifice in a way. But in another, they gain something greater, or some One. You sacrifice to work. You could be goofing off all those hours, or learning Swahili or writing the next great novel, but you're working, and human beings are made to work. That's a good thing. You're happier. Churches, hospitals, schools, all run on volunteers. A sacrifice in a way, but volunteers contribute to their community and they are *happier* than those who don't volunteer.

One of my best memories as a child is of my dad and me in a fight. He was a psychologist so I was trained not to bother him at work except on the hour. So I knew I had to mope through an hour before I saw him again. But then there he was, football under arm, walking toward me in the parking lot. What about your patient! I told him you were more important, my dad said, and we threw the football. That was a sacrifice—a billable hour! An angry patient! And it was worth it.

*We know who we are, by who, or what, we'll sacrifice for.* And with Jesus, sacrificing for him makes us fully alive. I've watched many of you sacrifice for your relationship with Jesus. Two of you coming back from Guatemala want to learn Spanish. For that one week a year where you'll go back. A sacrifice? Sure, it's hard work, costs money and time. And worth it. This church only exists because we sacrifice treasure and time to make it exist. Do we do it out of solemn obligation? Some days. But we wouldn't *keep* doing it if it wasn't a gift *to us*. Brandon Wrencher who'll speak to us in a moment and Erica Wrencher who will sing gave up a secure life in Chicago to make pennies to live in our Blackburn House in Todd. Is that a sacrifice? In a way, yes. In another, it's bringing them closer to Jesus and Jesus' people. Which is why we're alive in the first place.

<sup>6</sup>Finally for today, joy. "In his joy," scripture says, "he sells all and buys that field." The pearl that the merchant finds is of "great value," other translations say it is a pearl "of great price." I see this a lot. Folks who are religious, church members, committed, preachers, bishops, famous for their faith. *And there is no light behind their eyes.* And I wonder, *have you really met Jesus?* Why would you

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<sup>6</sup> III. Joy

put up with the church if you haven't met Jesus? The point of all this is the living Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, who exploded the grave and reigns now. Church without Jesus is like, what, dinner without food, friendship without time together, basketball without rims, dance without music. Jesus *is* the pearl of great price. *He* is the treasure in the field. And when we find him, we find everything.

I was introducing two of y'all after church. I love doing this, lights me up, its one of the best things I get to do. Wonderful person, meet other wonderful person, you're church people together, now enjoy one another. And I was well into my introduction when I realized one was crying, hard. But by then I was halfway into the intro, I couldn't stop. I apologized to both later. The one said, you know, I used to cry every Sunday in here like that. I was the perfect person to introduce her to. When I saw she was crying I could tell her, *this* is what church is for. A place to hurt, to heal, to be yourself and be loved by God. And that's joy. *Not* happiness! Those are real tears of sorrow. But joy, that in the midst of sorrow there is Jesus and one another and that is *good*. The Orthodox Church refers to Lent as a time of Bright Sadness. And now you know why. Tears are not despair. They are like baptism. Birth. Difficult. And yet joyful.

Jaylynn has been in South Africa so I can't help but close with<sup>7</sup> a story from Desmond Tutu, great Nobel Laureate from that country. She saw his house last week. He used to be neighbors with Nelson Mandela, the only street in the world with two Nobel Peace prizewinners on it. Can you imagine what the neighborhood block parties were like? Hey Nelson, wearing your medal today? Tutu says when the Europeans showed up in Africa the Africans had the land and the Europeans had the bible. The Europeans said "Let us pray." And when the Africans opened their eyes, the Europeans had the land and the Africans had the bible. Joking about the loss of land, freedom, humanity for centuries. Then Tutu says this, we win in this exchange. Because we're going to take this book, the bible, seriously--urgently. Sacrificially. Joyfully. With *everything* we have. That's Jesus' way. To make a way where there is no way. With great laughter. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> NT Wright's story

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor's story

<sup>iii</sup> A Russell Conyers image

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<sup>7</sup> <https://plus.google.com/u/0/112448795483591020843/posts>