

SERMON

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 13:44–46 · 1944

8 October 1944

Linköping Cathedral

Text: Matthew 13:44–46

Hymns: 296:5; 174:9–14; 426:3; 529:1–4; 349:5

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray.

God, give me sight that pierces the night.

Still I seek the hidden treasure.

O, let me find the pearl without equal.

Lead me to life, the joy in your kingdom.

Today's text does not depict any ideal figures for us. The man who finds the treasure on another person's property is not so sacrificing that he informs the landowner of his unknown riches. He keeps quiet about the matter, stakes everything on getting cash, and at last succeeds himself in getting the piece of land, and with it the treasure. The second half of the text today, the words about him who collected pearls, shows us exactly the same type of person: not a dreaming "collector" off to the side of the crude reality. No. "A merchant seeks good pearls." It is a pearl-dealer on the hunt for excellent goods, firmly determined not to let a good catch go from him. Both these men, the treasure-seeker and the pearl-dealer, have now, according to the word of Jesus, something to say to us about "the kingdom of heaven." "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure." "Again, it is with the kingdom of heaven as when a merchant seeks good pearls." The whole parable is to be applied to spiritual and divine things, not to earthly

and human. The difference: if I strive after an earthly treasure, I hinder another from getting it. Not so with the heavenly treasure. What then has the parable to say to us about our relation to God and his eternal kingdom? It has three very clear and simple truths to impress on our hearts this day — three lessons.

First. The spiritual reality is not easily visible and manifest, but hidden, something one must search for.

Many had gone over the piece of land where the treasure lay hidden. When at last it became known what a fortune the fortunate one had won with his find, more than one poor day-laborer must have said to himself: “Right next to that bit of land I have tramped hundreds of times, and just beside it I myself have stood and dug, but I could find nothing. I am as poor today as I have always been.” The spiritless person feels indeed already here in time, now and then, in a half surmise, his poverty. But the full insight into the poverty of godlessness comes first in the hour when the treasure of the kingdom of heaven is lifted into the light, this day beyond death, incomprehensible for our thought, when the eternal life becomes manifest. Here in time one can in any case always catch hold of the heathen’s comfort: it is only dreams and fancies, this pious talk about heaven and eternity. Here in earthly life the divine treasure is “hidden in a field,” an ordinary earthly field, which looks precisely like all other fields. A stream of words flows into our ears. Why should the eternal life lie precisely in the words of the Bible? It is only a book among other books. A thousand notions and thoughts surge through my soul. Why should precisely that voice, which quietly exhorts inside me — be true, think of your fellow human beings and their best — why should precisely that voice, which the Christians call the conscience, be God’s voice? That voice is surely only a fruit of the upbringing of many generations. The power which I want to call God, he must stand outside all outward forms. Yes, if the church had had power to hinder the war, if the church could remake the earth and abolish evil, then I could believe that God was in the church. But now — that God should have laid his heavenly power in the water of baptism and in the wine and bread of the Supper — no, that you must prove, before I can believe it. No proof comes. “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure which has been hidden in a field.” That field does not differ from other fields, in which no gold-treasure lies, but only poor earth is found. Christianity looks like everything else human. But “he who seeks, he receives.” Always, in all centuries, there have been people who have sought and searched for the precious pearl, the secret of fellowship with God, and who have found. The hidden treasure has become the riches of their life.

Next. No one has been able to possess the life in God without giving up less important values of life.

When the man had found the treasure in the field, he sold everything he owned. Otherwise he could never have bought the piece of field. And the pearl-dealer was forced to do the same in order to come into possession of the matchless pearl. One thing and another in their movable goods it was indeed painful to part from. But when they stood in the choice between these small dear things on the one side, the pearl on the other side, they let their old possessions go. Without this measure they would forever have remained in their poverty. It is necessary for the Christian to give up transgression of God's commandments, single commandments. We come, however, somewhat to the side of the text if we stop here. Sin is hard to see through. Through the parable of the treasure and the pearl the Lord wants to say to us that we sometimes need to push away from ourselves even such things as are in themselves decent and respectable. They are only too little worth to be allowed to compete in our life with the pearl of the kingdom of heaven.

Here each must test himself. Has it not gone so in this time, that the best among us at their height have the development of their own personality as their goal? Do they not only strive after their own health and ease with existence? Therefore there are soon nothing but small people in our culture, people who have not wanted to sell everything and who therefore have not won really great spiritual treasures either. For the treasure, the pearl, is something outside ourselves. Those who possess it are perhaps not at all so well kept and sound as you, but they are richer than you. They have been forced to let go certain values of life, but just so they have seen the meaning of life, serving love. And even if they had to pluck out their eye or cut off their hand, they know that the word of Christ is true: "It is better to enter into life maimed or lame than to be wholly uninjured and be cast into the burning Gehenna." If you are poor without understanding why, and must say to yourself that even this day you do not know why you really live, then the ground-fault in your life is probably this: that you own altogether too many trifles, and you strive after such cheap things instead of letting them go and so becoming able to win the pearl of life, the eternal life in God, which stands through death.

Last. He who has reached this life, he has only won and lost nothing.

Right at the beginning we marked the business-like feature in our parable, and perhaps we were a little offended at this: both the men sold everything they owned, but the final sum was still a clear and palpable gain. Just this feature is the very kernel of our preaching text. We

should gladly have seen that there was at least some little loss. It makes an appealing impression when the Christian person is painted as a noble religious figure with the shine of sacrifice over him. In the text, however, there is not the least trace of a thought of a sacrifice — precisely the opposite. If the treasure and the pearl had shown themselves to be pure imagination, then the man would have made a loss. But now it is a matter of realities. “The kingdom of heaven” is not a religious notion. It is a real kingdom, which certainly here on earth looks meager, and whose king was hanged on a cross, a kingdom which is hidden under weak words and sacraments and which in us is marked only in the Spirit’s unutterable sighs, but which beyond death and the grave shall come forth in all its mighty power, then, when our risen King wakens us all from the dead.

The treasure was certainly “hidden in a field,” but it was no dream. It held to be taken hold of and lived on. Therefore it also says: “...and in his joy he goes away and sells everything he owns.” He knew: I lose nothing. That joy you shall meet, whichever leaf in the history of Christ’s congregation you want to read. Paul counts under thanksgiving his Jewish learning as refuse and his prison bonds as a bond of union with Christ. Augustine casts the ancient culture from him and worships in his joy: “My God, restless was my heart until it found rest in you.” Francis breaks away from his rich childhood home and becomes “God’s little poor man,” but still in death praises, happy as a child, the name of the heavenly Father. And there comes Luther, believing and singing: “...not for heaven, not for earth, we go to the strife and glad we are.” (Sven Lidman struck out, my note.) These are only a few with known names. They mix “in the great company which no one can number, of all races and tribes and peoples and tongues,” these who “have come out of the great tribulation.” Their common song of praise is “as the roar of great waters.” Nothing have they lost.

And now the question: do I belong to this company? Our hearts answer both with hope and with anxious trembling. However we test the inward witness of our conscience, on that way we never feel with full security that we may count ourselves among these blessed and elect. The security comes first when we hear our Savior’s voice speak to us: “Whatever you ask in my name, that you shall receive.” Amen.

A crossed line at the end, replaced by the word above: “Fear not, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom.”

Translator’s notes. He gave this sermon no title. The man who keeps quiet and buys the field is left as he tells it, not made noble. The church that cannot hinder the war is left. Sven Lidman is struck in his

own note and is not restored. The closing word is the one he set in place of the crossed line.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·