

Popcorn Parables

Matthew 13:33, 44-46 ³³ He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." --- 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.

Popcorn Parables

Today's text is four verses that contain three teeny-weeny stories. They appear to be so short that there's no way that there's anything really deep or complicated here. But after spending weeks with a series of heavy Christian meals from the Sermon on the Mount, a little gospel snack might just be the thing! Popcorn by itself is a very light snack until you drizzle melted butter on it and add generous amounts of salt. If you don't doctor popcorn up with cheese dust or caramel coating, it can be a little light snack that doesn't ruin your diet. When you pop a piece or two of popcorn in your mouth you find that it's tasty, but it doesn't require a lot of chewing. Let's see if there's anything to chew on in these three tiny stories. Maybe all we need to do is just pop them into our brain like we pop popcorn into our mouth.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." There are pearls in each of our lives. The pearls are those things that bring us pleasure, give us happiness, things that are a source of joy and contentment in our lives. We often start by noticing the little pearls in life. There's the hat that looks so good, the shoes that are so comfortable. Pearls can be things like grandmother's pie recipe, eating a Skeeen burger, being on the team that won district championship. A new job may be a pearl, or buying a house, or a new computer. Some pearls are bigger than others, of course. Recognition at work and children who do well are bigger pearls. The greatest pearl is the kingdom of God, or as Matthew prefers to call it, the kingdom of heaven.

When we find that pearl, all else slides down the scale of importance. We let go of tiny pearls; we spend less time on pearls that don't matter so much. During our Summer Plus program this year, we've been reading and reflecting on the book, "same kind of different as me." Though she isn't a major character in the book, it's obvious that Sister Bettie is someone who has found a great pearl and she has set aside most of the other pearls in her life. Denver Moore tells the story this way. "After her husband died, Sister Bettie felt the Lord tuggin on her heart, telling her to spend the rest of her life serving the homeless. She sold her home and everything she had except for a little bitty Toyota truck, and she asked the folks at the Union Gospel Mission could she set up housekeeping down there. It didn't take long 'fore most a' the homeless folks in Fort Worth knowed Sister Bettie. She'd go to restaurants to ask em for their leftovers, and stores to ask em for socks and blankets and toothpaste and such. Then she'd haul her old bones up and down the nastiest streets, offering to help men so mean they'd as soon tear your head off as look at you. After a while . . . even the meanest man on the street wouldn't dare lay a hand on her. Every Wednesday, she fed 200 or 250 folks at the Lot,"¹ an empty lot in one of the worst neighborhoods in Fort Worth. Sister Bettie found the pearl of great value for her life. She found that which gave her life the greatest meaning, the most fulfillment, and the deepest contentment. In finding this, she let go of many other pearls in her life that would distract her, that would take time away from the great pearl in her life.

The little parable just before the one about the pearl is similar. Jesus said, "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." I think of some of the friends I met in seminary. One was a

lawyer. His life was good by most accounts and the future lay prosperously before him. But in the field we called seminary, he found a greater treasure. He left the practice of law and went back into debt so that he could unearth the treasure that seminary held for him. Another friend left a successful career in computer technology to seek the treasure of seminary. And he uprooted his family, and his wife interrupted her career, so that he could accept a call to ministry several states away. It's no coincidence that we sometimes refer to this as laboring in the field of ministry. Many walk away from the treasures of high paying jobs, the treasures of recognition and comfort, in order to dig up the greater treasure of knowing and serving God better.

We can all find greater treasure here and there. Some, in reading the book "same kind of different as me," have been inspired to uncover the treasure of serving the homeless in their own community, the field where they live, so to speak. Many have found new understanding of homelessness as the treasure they dig out of the book. Some have learned the treasure of humility and that the homeless have treasure to offer to them. There are those in this congregation who have found valuable treasure as they plowed the field of a Bible class. There are those who went on a mission trip some years ago and found that in working for the good of others, they received more than they gave. In the mission field they found unexpected treasure. In both the parable of the pearl and the parable of the treasure found in the field, the point isn't so much that one must forsake all they have to enter heaven, but rather that we should all keep our eyes open so that we will see the kingdom when we come across it and recognize it for the great value it holds for us.

The third popcorn parable in today's reading is, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." It's essential that we know that leaven was unclean in the Jewish culture of that day. It wasn't little foil packets of Fleischman's dry yeast that was used to make bread rise. The yeast was the mold on a moldy old piece of bread. A bit would be added to flour and water to make the dough rise. Too little produced very little rising of the dough. Too much, not only caused the dough to rise, but also could ruin the flavor of the bread. There's the temptation on the part of many Christians to use too much leavening in the dough that represents the world around us. We can overwhelm the unchurched people around us with too much fervor. We can offend them with judgmentalism, with great visions of guilt and damnation, until they reach the point where we have pushed too hard and the relationship is spoiled. Many young adults reject any thought of Christianity because they have come to see it as hypocritical, judgmental, irrational, and without joy.

On the other hand, if we hide the leaven in the flour, if we do our good works without fanfare, if we surprise others with meekness and love, then just as leaven corrupted the dough, so can we corrupt our culture with bits of Christian life. It can be insidious. It can take a while to change things. But instead of driving others away, we can corrupt them with love. Again, looking at the example of the two men in the book "same kind of different as me," one can see how both men changed and grew closer to the kingdom of God as they were slowly, tenderly, influenced by repeated but random acts of love for a neighbor. The cook at the mission for the homeless, advised volunteers in their relationships with the homeless to, "infect them with love." Corrupt the selfishness of the world with generosity. Corrupt the cynicism of the world with trust. Corrupt the fear and hatred of the world with love. In so doing we corrupt the world with the kingdom of God.

These are three little parables. Not much bigger than a bite of popcorn. But have you noticed how popcorn hulls tend to get caught in your teeth and stick with you? Perhaps, because these parables are short and pithy, they too, will stick with us, reminding us to always keep our eyes open for surprising glimpses of the kingdom of God – and to live our lives such that we infect the world with God's love and compassion. Amen.

¹ Ron Hall and Denver Moore, *same kind of different as me* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2006) p 115