

HOMILY ON JULY 27/8 IN 2014

Our folklore, our movies and the occasional headline in our news tell the story of discovered buried treasure or the finding of a shipwreck full of ancient gold coins. We seem to have an inexhaustible imagination and interest in stories of searches for treasure hidden away in secret caves, under the sea, or in forgotten vaults. Now the modern-day treasure hunters, armed with the latest gadgets to scan the beach for washed up nuggets, or dive the depths for submerged bullion, do occasionally find that lost treasure trove—hence the desire within our hearts that we too might stumble across a hidden treasure one day. After all earlier this year, a couple found hundreds of gold coins on their property and they weren't even looking for such a prize. Fortunes can indeed be found! And are we not tempted to try to get rich quick and isn't that why we buy lottery tickets or go to Las Vegas?

Our gospel lesson today, as recorded by St. Matthew, gives us a set of brief parables told by our Lord.

Unlike many of the parables of Jesus, which were more extended stories with plotlines and surprise endings—such as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son—these short parables come hurling at us with rapid-fire speed.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like this ...and like this and like this. It is a treasure found in a field, a rare pearl, a net full of fish, and a homeowner emptying out his storeroom...

So what has the Kingdom of Heaven to do with these varied images?

We barely have time to think about each one before the next one is upon us.

These are not developed stories; they are one-liners. They are images whizzing past us like landscapes glimpsed from a passing train.

And so what are we to make of this teaching Jesus gives us, this string of parable pearls?

FIRST, Jesus may be saying to us that with the Kingdom of Heaven, there is an element of hiddenness, of mystery, of search and discovery. It is the Kingdom of Heaven, after all, that Jesus is talking about.

The Kingdom of Heaven is the reign and realm of God, where God's rule and will are lived out, where relationships are marked by justice and love, where ego is sacrificed for the greater good, where communion with God and each other is more important than personal gain and accomplishment.

That sounds heavenly, doesn't it? And it is. But it can happen here on earth as well.

Recall that Jesus taught us to pray to our Father: Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

But how could Jesus describe this indescribable earthly kingdom?

How could he open our minds to see what we have never even imagined?

By the use of metaphors, similes and parables he takes what we know—fields, pearls, fish, household goods—and allows these everyday earthly items to become stained glass windows through which heavenly light might shine.

Jesus talks in slanted language, much as we do when we write poetry to describe feelings of love or use expressions of art to convey deep emotions.

But even this slanted language is part of the hiddenness of the Kingdom, requiring the hearer to think outside the box, to stare again at the mundane and ordinary, in order to search for a deeper meaning than lies on the surface.

And this is work that not everyone is willing to do.

The SECOND thing these parables teach us is that the kingdom of Heaven can be found and there is great joy when we find it.

Yes, the Kingdom requires some diligence and searching, but it can be found.

The buried treasure in the field, the pearl of great price, the good fish in the net, the household treasures in the attic—all of them are found in these parables and the joy in that discovery is palpable because in each case, the discovery came after careful, often strenuous work.

In each of these brief parables, the treasure is found, but only because someone was paying attention, noticing or searching for what many others may have passed over without recognition.

It makes you wonder, what treasure of insight, what treasure of relationship, what treasure of service might we be missing, walking past every day? All because we are not looking, we are not searching, we are not open to the possibility and potential hidden in the midst of the ordinary moments of our lives.

But when we find it—whether it be the love of our lives, or an insight that changes our perspective, or the calling and purpose that sets our hearts on fire—there is great joy that such a find brings us!

And then there is the THIRD thing these parables teach us. The Kingdom of Heaven often buries its treasure in plain sight, the extraordinary hidden among the ordinary.

Like rare authentic diamonds lying inconspicuously beside costume jewelry in a tray, or a lump of gold ore nestled next to common river rocks at the bottom of a stream, the Kingdom of Heaven is most likely “hidden” in the open, available to anyone who has the discernment to see it and to practice it.

Could it be that Jesus uses such ordinary comparisons in his parables because he wants us to realize that the Kingdom of Heaven is not locked up in a mountaintop monastery, or beneath the altar of a cathedral encased in a vault?

It can be seen, and experienced, in the ordinary places of our lives.

God comes to us, all the way to us. That is the essential message of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, who was born in an ordinary stable, and raised by a largely unnoticed family.

Jesus himself was God’s extraordinary presence, hidden in plain sight.

His entrance to this world, and his upbringing, was so very plain, so very ordinary, that most people simply overlooked him.

Could it be that the window through which the Kingdom of Heaven might be seen is the smile of an infant, the wonder on the face of a child, the beauty of a sunset, the unexpected gesture of generosity,

the joy of a wedding, the warmth of an embrace at an airport—could it be that all of these might be windows through which the Kingdom of Heaven can be found?

If we could only know how and where to notice, or how to discern the extraordinary shining through the ordinary!

And that brings us to the FINAL idea Jesus may be teaching us in these parables. The Kingdom of Heaven requires discernment and wisdom to be able to recognize the treasure of God when we see it.

In our reading today from the Old Testament, young King Solomon was visited in a dream by God, and given the opportunity to ask for any wish to be granted.

It sounds like one of those stories of a genie in a bottle granting wishes to the one who learned how to rub the lamp and set the genie free.

But in this case, God was testing the young monarch to reveal his true character.

When Solomon asked only for wisdom, that he might rule his people with justice and compassion and courage, God was so pleased that he also gave him the wishes that many of us would have listed, given that same opportunity—and so in addition to wisdom, Solomon was also given wealth, long life and success.

But it was his wisdom that became the lasting legacy of Solomon's life.

He chose the most important thing—the wisdom to recognize the presence of God, which most other people overlook. And this wisdom is a gift that keeps on giving.

Truly, this is the gift Jesus is trying to give us in these parables. Consequently we need to ask ourselves: Do I even want to be wise?

There is an ancient Arab proverb that teaches: Every morning I turn my face to the wind and scatter my seed. It is not difficult to scatter seeds, but it takes courage to go on facing the wind.

And we do need to face the wind if we are seriously seeking wisdom. After all, there are numerous obstacles; too often we are so consumed with the details of day to day living that we forget about the primary reason for our existence-- the desire of being one with our God. It takes courage to change, to challenge ourselves to seek more of life than momentary satisfaction. Certainly, life isn't about satisfaction; life is about hope, life is about faith, life is about love...and all this returns us to a God who has already started to plant the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth.

This dream of oneness with our God takes a firm resolution because it takes introspection and when we look inside, we don't always like what we see and so we are tempted to ignore what really is true about ourselves.

But God won't let us; there is simply too much at stake. And so day after day, we have yet another opportunity to search for this treasure, regardless of the pitfalls.

Fortunately, this ongoing search is the only treasure map we will need in order to find the true treasure of life, both here and hereafter....