

FINDERS KEEPERS, LOSERS WEEPERS

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Reading: Matthew 13: 44

Heaven's imperial rule is like treasure hidden in a field: when someone finds it, that person covers it up again, and out of sheer joy goes and sells every last possession and buys that field.¹

All of us believe that we deserve a break. It does not matter how old we are, how much money we make, or the relative security we enjoy. We work hard for our money. We have made sacrifices for our family. We have paid our dues to society and we are worthy of any fortune coming our way.

I certainly feel that way. I have worked hard all of my life. When I was ten years old I started mowing lawns, weeding flowerbeds, and edging sidewalks. In high school I worked in a restaurant bussing tables. In college I had a part-time job, and in graduate school I had a full time job working in a psychiatric hospital. I served a small Methodist church full-time as a doctoral student. And from there I pursued my career in parish ministry. Though many of you have pursued other career or life options, you could tell a similar story. And through it all we have said repeatedly, "Give me a break!"

I think of my mother who sacrificed her many creative talents to raise children. She served the PTA, worked at the school carnival, was a band booster, chaperoned Methodist Youth Fellowship dances, and labored as a den mother and Boy Scout chauffer. My mother gave up her life to support my father's business interests, including the drudgery of his coin laundry and dry cleaning business. She had many

¹ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. © the Polebridge Press, 1993), p. 196.

offers from florists and gift stores to arrange their flowers and displays. All were abandoned in deference to my father's businesses.

Mom often prefaced a sentence with, "When I win the lottery," which was followed by a list of all the things she would get for her children, grandchildren, and friends. Of course she would think of a few personal indulgences. If anybody deserved a break it was my mom. She deserved the sunshine of kismet.

When we finally catch a break and things start going our way we are beside ourselves with joy. We can't believe our good luck. Finally we have triumphed over the obstacles and burdens that have kept us from our fullest potential and highest happiness. Nothing can stop us now, baby. And nothing had better get in our way. Many people are certain that such fortune was God's will for them, be it a spouse, a child, a prize, or an inheritance. We are so deeply immersed in the joy of our good fortune that we cannot imagine that such joy can ever be spoiled. Indeed, we are besotted with joy.

The parable of the treasure in the field is focused on the joy of the finder. The finding is so great and the joy is so powerful the finder will sell every other possession in order to buy the field and claim the treasure buried within it. If you approach this parable as allegory, you might think that the treasure is nothing less than Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior. By the grace of God we are given the free gift of salvation and there is nothing we own that we should not give up to claim the prize of deliverance from sin and death. When you have the born again treasure your life will be filled with unsurpassable joy. Ultimate bliss will be yours on earth and in heaven.

New converts to religious experience are unbearably happy. They are so excited about their new discovery, the new direction their lives are taking, and the new sense of fulfillment they are currently enjoying. But Jesus is not the only object of their joy. Talk to the college student who has just read Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*, and try to contain the naughty joy of agnosticism. Consider the obsessive passion people feel in the arms of a new lover. They will give up any body or any thing for the exhilaration of sexual ecstasy. People often come to progressive Christianity and are overwhelmed by the power of liberal religion. For the first time in their lives they are encouraged to think for themselves, explore religious ideas, and ask many questions. They hear things from our free pulpit they have never heard in any other church. The freedom of liberal religion is intoxicating and they rush to embrace their newfound faith. They are like the person in the parable who finds a cache of wealth and in the joy of the moment sells everything to buy the field and claim the treasure.

There are some scholars, however, who warn us that the emphasis on the joy of finding the treasure is misplaced. Indeed, there are several complications in this parable that suggest that something devious is afoot. There is something not quite legal or moral going on and we had better put excitement into perspective.

In the first place we need to understand that treasure in the Hebrew Bible can certainly mean gold and silver. But that is not what the faithful pursue. Real treasure is wisdom. Listen to these words from the book of Proverbs (2:1-5):

“My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your hearts to understanding; if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding; if you seek it like silver, and search for it as

for hidden treasures – then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.” (New Oxford Annotated Bible.)

The treasure in this reading is wisdom, the wisdom of God. Wisdom is of greater value than silver or precious gems buried in a field. The child is instructed to pay attention to wisdom, to work and study for its attainment, and to search for it. A life given to the search for wisdom will be blessed with understanding, awe, and the knowledge of God. This kind of treasure hunt is the kind that enriches the character of the child who is willing to work hard.² The search for the treasure of wisdom and the diligence of the child reflect deep character on the child’s part.

By contrast, the parable of the treasure in the field tells us nothing about the character of the one who finds the treasure. We do not know whether or not he deserves to find good fortune. In this story the man is plowing a field and stumbles upon the booty. In other words he was not working to find the treasure. As the parable progresses we begin to question the integrity of the finder. For just as soon as he discovers it he immediately buries it. He finds it and conceals it. Clearly he is elated and rushes out to sell everything that he owns in order to buy the field. But why hide it in the first place?

The answer is that he hides it because the treasure is ill gotten. There are moral and legal questions about whether the man has a legitimate claim on the treasure. Do you remember the time as a child when you found a toy on the front porch or in the playground at school? You knew it was the toy of a brother or sister or playmate. But you took it home. Maybe you played with it secretly. But one day the rightful owner sees you playing with it and demands that you return it. And with the most god awful singsong voices you chanted,

² Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 395-396.

“Finders keepers, losers weepers.” We have all sung that song. No matter how loud or often we sang it we knew in our hearts that we had no rightful claim on the toy. The man in the parable knew this truth just as well as children do.

Brandon Scotts cites rabbinic law that states that, “treasure that can be presumed to have an owner cannot be claimed by the finder.”³ The finder in this parable thinks he can get around the law by buying the land. The fact that he conceals the treasure after he finds it suggests that even in his own mind his claim on the treasure is doubtful. John Dominic Crossan observed, “If the treasure belongs to the finder buying the land is unnecessary. But if the treasure does not belong to the finder, buying the land is unjust.”⁴ Suddenly we are confronted with a complicated moral question that makes finding any kind of treasure, even if it is Jesus, fraught with tension. We are challenged to consider the kingdom of God on the one hand and the temptations of joy over and against the life of integrity and wisdom. To put it another way we are tempted to let our emotions run away with us, even to the extent that we neglect the new moral responsibilities that come with membership in the kingdom of God.

On April 6, 2011 it was announced that there was one winning lotto winner for the power ball, valued at 221.7 million dollars. The winner is from the state of Indiana. Imagine that kind of good fortune. What luck! Someone’s ship has come in. Who could contain their excitement and joy? But we all know that as soon as the winner claims the prize there are immediate responsibilities. The first is income tax. They will not take home the full \$221.7 million, probably about half of that. Then they will have huge responsibilities for how they will spend or invest that money. Many family members and

³ Ibid. p. 399.

⁴ Ibid.

friends, some of whom they have not seen in years, will plead for a gift. Charities and churches will have their hands out. With the prize comes tremendous responsibility. And we have enough experience with the lotto at this time to know that many people do not handle this responsibility well. Examples abound of people who actually wind up bankrupt, divorced, or end up in jail because they have run afoul of the IRS.

Another story came out this week of Jennifer Dennison in Florida who won \$14 M at a slot machine. In the exuberance of winning she played the \$14 M and lost it all. Still believing her luck she allegedly withdrew \$500,000 from the savings and retirement accounts of her in-laws, and lost all of that as well.

Let us consider the parable in a more nuanced way. There is something reckless and carefree about finding the treasure in the field. Go back to the lotto. Imagine if you find a lotto ticket that is blowing down the street. You bend over, pick it up, and slip it into your pocket. Later that night the local television news announces the winning numbers that match the ticket you have found. Suddenly you are a multimillionaire. You did nothing to earn the money. You did not even buy the ticket. It is nothing more than sheer luck that has made you fabulously rich. All the expectations that you had for the next day are now changed. Your daily routine for work and family are now altered forever. For the first time in your hard-working life you can take it easy, relax about your financial worries, kick back and do all the things that a tight budget had prohibited you from doing before. Brandon Scott acknowledges that such fortune brings us joy, “Because it is not something earned or labored for but something found, it is lawless. Its joy is precisely in its lawlessness, not worked for character.”⁵

⁵ Ibid. p. 402.

The parable that Jesus told is teaching us that the kingdom of God is like a man who procured an ill-gotten treasure and is overwhelmed by joy. The joy has blinded his moral faculties. He is no longer considering the ethical consequences of his finding the treasure and the choices he now has to make. He is only thinking about the relief he feels with his newfound treasure. Dare Jesus be suggesting that we are often the inheritors of unearned grace and that such grace can blind us to our moral flaws? Is it possible that the imperial rule of God is a good news – bad news proposition? The good news is that when you are invited to swim in Sacred Currents you will be the beneficiary of God’s wisdom and joy. The bad news is that you still have to swim. The good news is that you may enjoy the peace of God. The bad news is that you have to keep working for justice. The good news is that you might find Eternal Life, that unconditional loving presence of God. The bad news is that you could drown in moral complacency.

Clearly Jesus does not mean to suggest that the treasure found in the field is Jesus. I do not think that as a Jew, Jesus would ever make such a presumption. He would never abandon the rich Jewish tradition of wisdom and wisdom literature. I think he knows that the treasure waiting for all of us to discover is this wisdom. I do not think he abandons the idea that such wisdom is discovered through the noble endeavors of study, reflection, theory, and practice. I also think he suggests that wisdom is still a treasure that we can never fully earn, regardless of how hard we work. And like all the gifts of life we must honor them, care for them, and nurture them. Wisdom never allows us to claim moral self-sufficiency. We are never so fortunate as to be free from moral agency. We are never so good as to be infallible moral agents.

Indeed, when fortune bestows upon us some new treasure we are called to new responsibilities. We ought certainly to celebrate this newfound joy. But joy cannot have us. She cannot claim us for her own. As we celebrate we also need to look through the Confetti, the Champaign bubbles, and the fire works to see clearly the responsibilities that are newly set before us.

I think about the birth of our daughter, Emily, an unexpected joy. She continues to bring joy to our lives. She also brings responsibilities that require attention every day. Those tasks include more than providing her shelter, clothing, food, intellectual development, physical health, and emotional nurturing. We are also given the mission to learn from her. She brings new insight and information, and new ethical choices we did not face when we were 12 years old. Just because we were given the gift of Emily we are not allowed to stop growing ourselves. We cannot spend the rest of our lives at the baby shower or the baptismal banquet. And as she moves into her teenaged years, you can rest assured we will be reminded of our many faults and limitations. Through it all, wisdom is meant to mature our hearts and minds.

The fact that my mother never won the lottery is probably a treasure chest for me. Who knows how such riches might have led to intellectual and moral indolence on my part. The hard work that has been required of me, the sacrifices, and even the suffering have given me far more wisdom than good luck has ever bequeathed. I think I am a better man and a better minister for it all. Now I must not let such a gift inflate my ego and blind me to my limitations. I dare not allow that gift to corrupt me into some cold and distant isolation. Jesus calls me over the tumult of happiness to the love and labor of God's wisdom

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