

“The Treasure”

Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, (July 24) 2011

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Annie Dillard tells how as a six- or seven-year-old living in Pittsburgh she would go out and hide a penny along a certain stretch of sidewalk, under a sycamore tree root or a crack in the sidewalk. And then beginning at one end of the block, she would draw arrows on the ground and write things like, “Surprise ahead!” or “Money, this way!” And then she would go hide, watching to see if someone might come along and be caught up in the joy of receiving a free gift and the excitement of an adventure.

What about you? Have you ever had the kind of compelling joy that comes with discovering a great treasure? Have you ever known the excitement of being on an adventure, a quest for some lost, mysterious treasure?

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone stumbled upon, then hid. Then, in his joy, he went and sold all that he had and bought the field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. On finding one pearl of great value, he sold all that he had and bought the pearl of great price.

Most of us like these kind of adventure stories. The success of the Indiana Jones movies have much to do with them being adventure stories of someone

obsessed with finding the hidden treasure. They're high adventure which spans the globe going to exotic places, with all sorts of risks. Or the recent *National Treasure* movies: A little boy discovers in the attic of his family's home an old chest containing treasure maps and clues. His grandfather sits down with him and tells him these wonderful stories of hidden treasures and their ancestors' search for them.

When I was in elementary school I remember how much I loved Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, the classic story of a boy finding a treasure map, with the "X" marks the spot, pirates like Long John Silver, sailing the oceans, bound for some unknown place, leaving everything on the basis of nothing more than the map.

Or when I was in junior high I discovered the 1950 movie and then the classic novel *King Solomon's Mines* by H. Rider Haggard. The hero, the great African hunter adventurer, Allan Quartermain, played by Stewart Granger in the movie, leads Deborah Kerr and others in a grand adventure across darkest Africa facing lions and tigers, tribes and peoples previously unknown, danger, all because of the promise of a great treasure.

As an adult I love the summer reading adventures of Dirk Pitt, fictional hero of author Clive Cussler. Pitt, a combination of an undersea diver and oceanographic expert and Navy Seal combined with the skills of a spy or detective, usually begins with the search for a sunken treasure, which of course leads to an adventure larger and more compelling than anyone could have guessed.

When I was growing up in West Texas, I lived a fairly normal life for boy in a small town in the 60's and early 70's. I was a good student, an athlete, a Boy Scout, and active at church. When I was about 12 or 13 we had an evangelist come and preach a revival who was unlike most of the evangelists I had heard. Instead of talking about asking Jesus into our hearts, he called us to give our lives to Jesus. Instead of just the same-old, same-old, I caught a vision of becoming part of something larger than me. It was a vision so compelling that it became the most important thing in my life and I felt it with a deep heaviness in heart. It was an adventure as a disciple of Jesus that while it might start out in a small town, was likely to lead anywhere in the world, and I knew that I had to join up, no matter what. That was when I walked forward and took the hand of my pastor telling him, I want to follow Jesus as a disciple. That was when I was baptized.

When I was in college I wanted to be a lawyer. F. Lee Bailey and Louis Nizer and Clarence Darrow were my heroes. By my second year in school, I began to wrestle with God over becoming a minister. I didn't want to become a minister; I thought ministers were a dime a dozen and were concerned with narrow interests, and dull, anemic, morality. Furthermore, I thought most clergy spent their time leading churches that were on the tail end of any change worthwhile going on in the world – war and peace, race and civil rights, poverty and hunger, etc. I didn't want any part of it.

But God wouldn't let me alone. Somewhere along the way I started reading brand-new magazines like *Sojourners* which told about churches and ministers and Christians involved in matters that mattered all over the world. And I discovered a

magazine out of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Atlanta called *SEEDS*, in which a few young radical baptists like Ken Sehested and Andy Loving told stories of churches and ministers doing things about poverty and hunger and justice and peace. It was in that magazine, around 1980, that I read about a small congregation in Nacogdoches who was doing some good stuff about hunger. I said to myself, “If I’m going to be a pastor, I’d like to be the pastor of a church like that.”

Two or three years later I attended a conference in Fort Worth on hunger, poverty and the church. The featured speaker was to be Andy Loving from *SEEDS* in Atlanta. I got there and discovered that I was one of only two Baptists in the whole conference, besides Andy. The other was Deanna Petty from here. When we broke in small groups according to our denominations, Deanna and I were on our own. I listened to her and she listened to me. I remember that she told me that Austin Heights was looking for a pastor and that I was the kind of pastor they were looking for. Unfortunately, I still had more seminary work to do, so the timing was not good and I went away sad but thinking, “I’d love to be the pastor of Austin Heights Baptist Church, or a church like it, one of these days.”

In the mid-eighties, I lived in Atlanta and was a member of Oakhurst Baptist Church and lived and worked with folks like Andy Loving and Ken and Nancy Sehested. We worked with homeless people, served food in the homeless shelter, held prayer vigils every time someone was executed in the Georgia electric-chair, held prayer vigils outside the gates of Fort Benning, where the death squads in Central America were trained, went to jail for crossing those lines. Here was a faith and kingdom that expected something of you. Here was a pearl of great price, a

treasure that I stumbled across.

Anybody who has a bus leaving on a journey to hunt for buried treasure, count me in.

Jesus is walking along a road one day. He is talking to people about the cost of discipleship. He tells them that, if they follow him, their own family could reject them. Everybody could turn against them. There might be imprisonment, beatings, worse. “There will be a cross involved,” he tells them.

And guess what happened? Some, not nine out of ten average people, but some, just at his word, dropped everything they were doing, deserted their families (for all I know), let the fishing business go down the drain, turned over the tables at the accounting firm, and followed him. That’s what the kingdom of God does to people who stumble upon it, says Jesus.

Anybody got a bus leaving on a journey to hunt for buried treasure – well, I was younger then. I’m now not so quick to jump on the bus and head toward the unknown.

“Come on! There’s a hunt for the greatest treasure of all! Come join us!” Well, I have to check my calendar for July, and for August, and September . . . indeed, I’m pretty well booked into next year. And I need to check to see if my club dues are paid. Is this thing insured? And where is the treasure? How long do you think we’ll be gone? Will there be air-conditioning? What about TV?

We get accustomed to what we know. It might be dull and boring but it's what we do, and if we stick with it long enough, we'll retire and buy a motor-home. William Sloane Coffin used to say, "Even if you win the 'rat race' you are still a rat." as a way of asking us if the race we're in is worth it?

But sometimes by the grace of God, we're just minding our business, plowing the field, and we stumble upon the treasure. And what then? What will we do?

I'm friends with a woman, a New Testament scholar and professor at the University of Toronto who has left her professorship and moved with her theologian husband and their daughter onto a farm north of Toronto to raise organic crops and write. Their daughter has Down's syndrome and they decided that the life of college teaching, committees, tenure, and such was not the life God wanted them to have with their daughter. So off she goes to milking cows, weeding gardens, and putting up hay, because she heard something of a treasure.

I know a man who was a banker in Portland, OR and got fed up. He heard of this treasure, so he quit the banking business, moved into a more modest neighborhood and joined a small community of Christians called Church of the Redeemer King. Now he works as the bookkeeper for a small bookstore, and gives away 30% of his modest income, while also working in a ministry with poor people helping them learn the basics of money management.

In so much of life, we get distracted, trivialities elbow out matters of great magnitude. We plow our accustomed furrows. We become preoccupied with our plans and projects. Little things choke out the important things. But then, in an instant, as if in a flash of recognition, it is possible to see. Something happens and we know that we are called to something bigger, something deeper, something so compelling that we drop our nets and follow. We get a phone call in the middle of the night. The doctor comes in and says, “Cancer.” Or we are hammering on a Habitat House, or we are tutoring a child so they can read. Maybe it’s as simple as teaching a Sunday School class or just showing up at church just like we do on any number of other Sundays. But suddenly something happens; everything comes into focus, and it is then we realize the relative unimportance of that which we have chased after for so much of our lives. Then sometimes, if we’ve got the guts, we begin a move toward the treasure.

I know that we are cautious – by habit or training or our place in life, we tend to be rational, we want to carefully consider the facts, never rush to judgment, never make a snap decision. That is all well and good much of the time. But in this life of being Christian, our inability to drop everything, to throw away it all on the pearl of great price, the treasure buried in the field, can lead to a life of slow death.

My old teacher Fred Craddock says he was on a trip to preach in New England. He says, “I was visiting a family. We sat around after dinner and talked. The children played with a family dog, a large, long, narrow sort of dog.

“That’s a full-blooded grey-hound,” the head of the house proudly told me.

“We got him in Florida after his racing days were finished. He is great with children.”

The children rolled on his back, their head between his paws. He licked them affectionately. Well, eventually it was time for the kids to go to bed. The parents gathered them up and made for the bedroom, leaving me alone with the dog.

I asked the dog, “What’s it like to be a greyhound and race professionally? I have never been to a grey-hound race myself.”

“It’s not a bad life,” said the grey-hound. “They treat you like a king. Feed you well. I had it made down there in Florida, racing.”

“Well, why did you leave?” Did you just get too old? You don’t look that old to me?” I said.

“No, I’m not old enough for retirement. I quit.” He continued, “If you had ever been to a grey-hound race, you might understand. In every greyhound race, all of the dogs line up, we are released, and then we follow a little white rabbit thing around the track. It’s not really a rabbit, it’s just some sort of stuffed thing that is white and is pulled around the track. We all chase it. One day, after a race, I got a close look at that rabbit. To my shock, I found out the rabbit was not real. That meant the race was not real. So I quit. I was almost ashamed to have spent so much of my life chasing a fake rabbit.”

Amen and amen.