

“What’s In Your Wallet?”

I once read an article about how a person’s wallet holds their life story; a place where one keeps their important treasures. I bet if you looked at your wallet, you would find many things of value to you. Pictures of loved ones; surely grandparents wallet is filled with pictures of the grandchildren. There is probably some cash or in today’s world a credit card of two or three or four. Maybe there is a small reminder or note you received from a special person that gave you special meaning. What do you do when you change wallets? Women for the most part keep their wallets in a pocketbook along with other essentials a woman might need to help others...tissues, make-up, aspirin, etc. I remember my mother would take her pocketbook and empty its contents on the kitchen table. She had either purchased a new pocketbook or wanted and use a different pocketbook. There the contents were on the table. She would go through the contents throwing out some things but keep other things putting them in the new pocketbook. A new pocketbook, filled with the necessities of life. A change that seemed to give new life for the next shopping experience. Where my mother would change her pocketbook, my father when he got a new wallet at Christmas time would empty the contents of his old wallet then meticulously replaces each item into the new wallet. He would look at each of the small pieces of paper; recalling its meaning and then return it to the wallet. A look at the past, relishing the importance then put it away for the future. A wallet holds the story of your life. A treasure of experiences. A woman might make changes to her treasure, a man seems satisfied with the past.

In today’s text from Matthew we find more parables. Just when we thought we were out of the gardening parables, the familiar parable of the mustard seed shows up! Then we have the farmer who finds treasure in the field; sells what he owns then buys the land so he can claim the treasure. Followed by the merchant in search of fine pearls; when he discovers the prize pearl, he too sells all he owns and buys the pearl. Finally there is the parable of casting the net into the sea and pulling in a boatload of fish. The fishermen keep the good fish and throw the bad ones back into the sea. Each of these parables begins with the phrase, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like...’... ‘a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; treasure hidden in a field discovered by another person; a merchant in search of fine pearls; a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind.’

Of the four gospel writers, Matthew’s text often speaks of the kingdom of heaven. This text was written approximately 90 years after the death of Jesus. Matthew proclaims after the resurrection the kingdom of the Son of Man is expressed through believers by their actions. He further teaches that only at the end of time will Jesus come as judge. Matthew tries to show the reader the extent of Jesus’ teachings using analogies of everyday life. Teachings new believers could understand. They are hanging on to the notion that God is judge. Fortunately, he proclaims the judgment will not come until the end; the time of death when there will be the

separation of souls. We heard this the past two weeks when “angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be gnashing of teeth.”

Let us look at two of these parables. What would you have done if you were the farmer plowing your neighbor’s field and you discover a treasure? A treasure of value beyond compare; in your excitement you realize your life could be changed literally overnight. You quickly cover it again, go home, count your savings, then offer to your neighbor to purchase his land. He has no idea what you are doing, but you know if the land is yours, the buried treasure becomes yours. This would have been a typical practice in Biblical times. There were banks, but they were not good places to store your valuables. Palestine’s history is filled with war. To keep conquerors from taking their valuables, the people would take their items of value to a field or marked place and bury them, with the intention of recovering them at a later time. The earth was a veritable storage house. Unlike today, we store our valuables in a safe at home or in a safety deposit box at the bank or in our wallets. We don’t know if the land owner knew the treasure existed. Do you remember the story of the man who gave his servants talents or coins of value? The first two servants receive their talents and invested them and multiplied their master’s money. The third servant buried his talent in the ground saying the master should have invested it. Some people invested their money while others buried it.

When I first read this parable I thought this man was being dishonest. I thought this man was taking advantage of the farmer. He knew there was treasure buried on the land and it could be his. All he needed to do was purchase the land and the treasure would be his. How could he live with himself, discovering the treasure, reburying it, then purchase the land from the owner? Early Palestinians would have thought nothing of this parable. Rabbinic law said that “if a man finds scattered fruit, scattered money...these belong to the finder.” Because this man found the treasure within the bounds of this law, it would not have been conceived as unethical. You know the saying, ‘Finders keepers, losers weepers...’

It is also likely the land owner did not know the treasure was buried there. If he knew it was there, why would he sell his land? It probably belonged to a previous owner who might have been killed in battle, or died unexpectedly. Since the current land owner didn’t know it existed the finder had the right to claim it.

Even if we think the finder was unethical, he was honest. He offered the farmer a fair value for his land. If he was dishonest, he could have run off with the treasure without saying a word. He could have taken part of the new found treasure and used it to purchase the land, instead he used his own monies for the purchase. He knew that was the right thing to do. Living in the Rabbinic law, he could claim the treasure by owning the land.

In the parable of the pearl, the merchant was a man who would buy things wholesale and sell them to a retailer. The common practice then was to wholesale items of value while looking for higher quality of the items for themselves. If you wanted to diversify your investments you bought pearls. Pearls were like diamonds today. Pearls were a woman’s best

friend in antiquity. A pearl that was perfect and beautiful was priceless. Egyptians and later the Romans worshiped the pearl. When women wanted to show their wealth, they put pearls in their hair. The wife of the Roman emperor Caligula, once went to a dinner party with pearls on her hair, ears, neck and fingers that today would be worth \$36 million dollars. It is said that Cleopatra had two pearls that were each worth half a million dollars at that time. When Roman Emperors wanted to show off how rich they were, they would dissolve their pearls in vinegar and drank them in their wine.

This parable describes a man who went seeking fine pearls to market them to retailers because he could sell them for a profit. Pearls were a good way to diversify one's investment portfolio. A smart investor, like today, would not invest all he had into one thing. Don't put your eggs in one basket. But that is exactly what both of these men did. The first man sold everything he had to buy a field with treasure, the second sold everything he had to buy one pearl. Both would receive their intended prize. They gave up all they had to gain a better position in life.

In the parable of the pearl, the merchant had to search for the pearl. In the parable of the treasure, the man discovered the treasure and pursued to obtain it. I believe both of these parables represent how the kingdom of God is made known to us today. The kingdom of God is ours. How each of us comes to know that kingdom is very different. Some of you might go about your daily work and stumble across the treasure of knowing God in your life by accident. Some of you might be like the merchant constantly looking for the pearl of heaven, the most precious gem of them all. No matter how you realize the kingdom of heaven, it requires giving up all that you have. Not that you are to go out and sell everything that you own, but it does require an examination of how you live your life. When you empty your wallet, do you put everything back in its place so that you have it for the future or will you make some changes and throw some old things out?

We constantly think about treasure. Maybe the treasure you seek is to have lots of money, or to be famous, or have power; you might even say your treasure is family and friends. Things we can see and touch. I believe it is safe to say, the treasure we seek is not necessarily always the treasure of knowing God in our lives. We have to have the best or newest gadget that comes along. Our daily lives are influenced by what we see and hold in our hands. We are out there looking for the something that will change our lives, willing to pay top dollar. God is a mystery to us. We can say we know God, but to know God is going to be different for each of us. God comes to us in as many ways as there are people. None of us can put our finger on God.

Will the possession of material goods get us into the kingdom of heaven? Of course not. We know that when we die we can't take our things with us. No matter how hard we try, our material possessions will remain on this earth. To get into God's kingdom requires work on our part while on earth. It means we sacrifice ourselves to the will of God. It means we turn all we do over to the glory of God. It means listening to what God desires for us and our neighbors. It means we love God the same way God loves us. It means to receive Jesus, the God sent to us

as a living sacrifice for all God's people. When you pray the Lord's prayer, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Face it that is tough work; to give up everything for God. But it is worth it to give up everything for God.

Whether you are like the farmer who was going about his daily work and stumbled on treasure, or you are like the merchant constantly searching for the greatest pearl, the giving of your total self will give you the greatest gift – to know the presence of God; the one who gave His only Son for all of us. To accept this gift from God may be to give up certain habits and ways of life which are very difficult to lay down, to take on a discipline and self-denial which are by no means easy, in a word, to take up our cross and follow Jesus. But there is no other way to peace of mind and heart in this life and to glory in the life to come. It is indeed worth giving up everything to accept and to do the will of God.

Like the Master card commercial says, "a mustard seed – 50 cents, a loaf of bread – 3 dollars, a pound of fish 10 dollars, a buried treasure - 1000 dollars, a pearl – 2000 dollars, the kingdom of God – priceless. Thanks be to God. Amen.