

A Proper 12 2026
Saint Barnabas Church, Falmouth MA
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Matthew 13:31-33; 44-49a

What do you treasure most in your life? What is most precious to you?

As Canadian wildfires blow smoke our way, as France and Spain burn, we watch news clips of evacuating families choosing what to throw in the car before fleeing for their lives

As we navigate gyrating fuel prices and fluid financial markets, we review our worldly needs and whether we'll make the Dow Jones average a barometer of our own happiness

What do you treasure most in life, what is most precious to you?

Today's scripture lessons provide a medley of vignettes about the good life

In a few short verses, we encounter bucolic images about mustard seeds, leavening flower, hidden treasures and nets cast at sea

Jesus knits together these pearls of wisdom as though he were walking through a county fair in the Midwest, commenting on the pigs, cows, and cotton candy, making profound insights about the most ordinary of things

Like the last two Sundays, in which Jesus reflected upon the sowing of seeds, Jesus sanctifies the ordinary as he points us toward God's love and blessing in daily life

At the same time, of course, he points us to the ultimate treasures that lie before us, if only we make wise, discerning choices

In seven verses, Jesus tells five parables about the Kingdom of God

We know about the mustard seed so well that it nearly overshadows the other gems

But what about the laborer who buys up the land in which is hidden a known treasure?

Or the merchant who sacrifices everything for the sake of the perfect pearl?

Hidden treasure was always a favorite theme of oriental literature

Middle East conflict is nothing new: we know that biblical Palestine experienced many wars because of its strategic location between Mesopotamia and Egypt

With pirates, soldiers and thieves abounding, the most reliable way to protect one's cherished valuables was to dig a hole and hide them in the desert

The Qumran Copper Scrolls, for example, tell us about fantastic treasures hidden away

In today's parable, a common laborer discovers a treasure, but for some reason he does not stick it under his cloak

Instead, he reburies his newfound treasure, pools his financial resources and purchases the land

The discovery of hidden treasure was every poor man's dream: through no particular skill or achievement on the laborer's part, he wins riches and the joy of discovery

The glimpse of the Kingdom comes from the perspective of one who finds something of great value, and in the context of this joy he sells all he has to fulfill his dream

The same themes connect us to the next parable about the valuable pearl

Instead of sheer luck, however, this man finds joy through his persistence

Like the stories of hidden treasures, precious pearls obsessed ancient storytellers

Pearls were highly valued signs of conspicuous consumption in Jesus' day: divers fished them up in the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean

Julius Caesar, for example, presented the mother of his eventual murderer, Brutus, with a pearl worth six million sesterces, or \$200K

Cleopatra is said to have owned a pearl worth 100 million sesterces, or \$3 million

In today's Gospel reading, a fortunate man finds the great pearl after diligent searching, and he remains surprised and overjoyed

Instead of indulging in campfire fish stories, however, Jesus brings a parabolic twist to point us toward the Kingdom of heaven

Today's parables say more about the stewardship of abundant joy than the morality of diligence

When great joy seizes us, it carries us away and all else seems valueless, and yet it should point us beyond self-satisfaction to a greater connection with the world

Life's deep treasures fill us with gladness, but these treasures should lead us beyond grubby selfishness toward an abundant posture in the world

As Anglicans, we approach the world in a spirit of abundance: God gives us joyful abundance in the gift of life and our Savior Jesus Christ

We can approach today's parables on two levels simultaneously

The first layer, to which I have been alluding, could be called the personal subjective: what do I treasure, how do I respond to joyous discovery, and how does it affect my approach to the world?

Jesus understands that, and yet he pushes us one step farther: ultimately, Jesus addresses not the personal subjective, but the divine transcendent

Repeatedly, Jesus points not to human feeling, but to God's action and posture toward the world

At least five times, Jesus addresses the kingdom of heaven and our foretaste of what's coming down the pike

Jesus uses everyday stuff—mustard seeds, pearls, and leaven—to make ultimate statements about where God is taking this world, about what it will be like in the kingdom of heaven

One of the great debates in Christian history played out around this theme, when two spiritual titans squared off and locked horns around themes that continue to affect you and me today

In the early fifth century, a man named Pelagius brought a number of questions about human nature, sin and grace into sharp relief

Pelagius argued that humankind possessed total freedom of will, and therefore we are totally responsible for our own sins

We were, Pelagius argued, created in the image of God and blessed by our creator, so we should not whine about sinful compromise and or incapacitation by mysterious weakness

A moral rigorist, Pelagius made the uncompromising assertion that perfection is possible, the ultimate goal, and the obligation of humanity

Self-help abounds: God has delivered us a pearl, and we darned well better make good use of it

On the other side stood Augustine of Hippo, who argued as follows:

We live amid human freedom and do not do things out of any necessity but as a matter of freedom

Second, our natural human freedom has been weakened and incapacitated—but not eliminated or destroyed—through sin

Our free will exists but remains distorted by sin; some force outside ourselves must diagnose our illness and cure it

For Pelagius, grace was something external and passive, something outside ourselves that provides us the moral compass with which to make our decisions about right and wrong

For Augustine, grace provided divine assistance to humanity, rather than moral guidance

Since you probably have heard more about Augustine than Pelagius, you have a clue about who won the great debate, and yet the tensions live on in places like the self-help sites on the internet

Like St. Paul, our faith proclaims that the Spirit intercedes in our weakness, with sighs too deep for words

This wonderful news becomes the finest pearl we will ever encounter in this lifetime

Jesus' securing the kingdom of heaven provides us the even-greater pearl as our future gift, not reward

This upright posture brings its own joy, along with its own mandate: share this treasure, this joyful abundance with the world

With joyous hospitality, help others discover this treasure and make it their own; claim the Great Commission to make disciples of all

Give without ceasing, because so much has been given to you; live as though the kingdom of heaven is yours