

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

"ONE MAN'S TRASH IS ANOTHER MAN'S TREASURE"

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12)

Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

31 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." 33 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. 47 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 51 "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." 52 And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

DIAGNOSIS: “Trash”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – “Hidden”

My mother for years used to love to go to what she called “Trash and Treasure Sales.” I probably would have called them rummage sales or flea markets. She loved to rummage through what most would call junk in search of some relic, artifact or antique that would be of great value. She was a firm believer that “one man’s trash” could very easily become “another man’s [her!] treasure!” And more often than I would ever want to admit, she would indeed discover some treasure hidden in the midst of someone else’s trash. She had an uncanny ability to see something of great value where I would only see a reason to summon the junk truck.

Jesus exhibits a similar ability throughout his ministry and especially in his use of “the parables.” The old Sunday School definition of a parable I learned many years ago still rings true: “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Through an earthly story, an earthy image, or an ordinary portrayal of the most mundane things of this world, Jesus gives us a glimpse of “heaven,” of the Kingdom of God, of what God is doing in the here and now through him. Hidden in the midst of the ordinary and mundane trash of this world lies the hidden treasure of the Kingdom of God.

In a series of five short parables in today’s Gospel Jesus shows how the transformational power of God’s love is often hidden in the monotonous routine of the everyday. The Kingdom lies buried in the drab concoctions of daily discards and ordinary also-rans that litter our lives. The Kingdom seems to be anything but extraordinary. A mustard seed is tiny. The yeast seems invisible and insignificant. The treasure is buried in a field. The fine

pearl just seems like another candidate for a piece of cheap costume jewelry. Hidden in the huge mix of marine life trapped by the dragnet lies a catch of the finest seafood. When we look at our congregations, we see only dysfunctional organizations struggling to pay their bills. We look at our own lives and see only dreams unfulfilled, ambitions unrealized, and sins unforgiven. If there is a God out there in whom we can trust, that God is sure doing his best to hide.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – “Blind”

We are unable to see the presence of the Kingdom at work among us because we are blind. Unable to see what God is doing right under our noses, we look in all the wrong places for all the wrong things. Our faithless idolatry seeks the created to give us what only the Creator can. We are unable to see that God has come among us in the ordinary flesh and blood of a carpenter's son from Nazareth, that a tiny mustard seed can produce a mighty tree, that a little yeast mixed with flour can make a truckload of bread, that the weed patch out back actually holds buried treasure, that the pearl we thought was only fit for cheap costume jewelry during Mardi Gras is actually worth mortgaging our house to purchase, that the chef at that expensive down-town restaurant would pay a fortune to have the smelly mish-mash in the bottom of our dragnet rushed to his kitchen. But we are blind to all of that. Unwilling and/or unable to believe that God would care that much for us, we ignore what is right before us in Word, in Sacrament, in the ordinary lives of ordinary saints, in the forgiveness of sins. Instead we are infatuated with the flashy, with immediate gratification, with the latest dividend report, and with the bottom line because that is all we can calibrate, calculate, and tabulate. But in the process we only further reveal our own blindness to what God is offering us right before our very own eyes.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – “Trashed”

Ultimately God will not be mocked. Finally, “at the end of the age” (or when we breathe our last, whichever comes first and it doesn’t matter to God), God will “separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Just because we can’t see the obvious, it doesn’t mean that God can’t see the obvious. Just because we have been blind to God, it doesn’t mean that God will also be blind to us and our failure to see what he has been up to in his Son. Therefore, the day is surely coming (in fact, it is already upon us) when God will sort out the “good into baskets but (throw) out the bad.” (Have you been to a cemetery lately? Or visited the local hospital or read today’s newspaper?) In other words, God knows trash when he sees it and won’t make the same mistake we did. We mistook trash for treasure and treasure for trash. God won’t do that and has promised us that all the trash will be trashed, dumped on the trash heap of history and incinerated in “the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” An honest and unvarnished look at “man’s inhumanity to man” makes it obvious that the trashing has already begun. (You can be sure that many will disagree with the harshness of this diagnosis. God can’t possibly be that severe! But what else can you expect to hear when “the blind lead the blind?”)

PROGNOSIS: “Treasure”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – “Treasured”

The human present and future would be bleak indeed were it not for God’s grand interruption, God’s grand “nevertheless!” God cannot bear to leave us smoldering on the trash heap of history, even though that is what we deserve. Ultimately God treasures us more than anything else in his creation and demonstrates that conviction in the most peculiar of ways. God himself calls a halt to the trashing of this world by coming among us not with flashes of lightning nor booming trumpets but quietly,

unobtrusively, hidden in the daily and mundane, as an ordinary son of a carpenter, as bread broken, wine poured, water splashed and promises offered. He is the tiny mustard seed that will become a great shrub, the mysterious yeast leavening the loaf, the hidden treasure that transforms a field into a real estate gold mine, the pearl of great price waiting to be discovered, the delectable seafood lurking in the depths of the dragnet only to one day be discovered for the culinary delicacy that it is. But unlike the seed, yeast, treasure, pearl, and gourmet fish in the parables of today's Gospel, this One's true value would be overlooked, even rejected. The world was blind to the treasure that he was. Even worse, he would be despised, "stricken, smitten by God and afflicted," nailed to a cross, trashed, and condemned like all of the sinners who had gone before him.

But God knew what he was doing. God did not mistakenly confuse this treasure with the trash. It was precisely through such willingness to trash his own Son that God would love the world and demonstrate how much he treasured his only begotten Son. And when his Son was raised "on the third day," it was finally clear, once and for all, ultimately and eternally, what God had accomplished on that cross. God had "treasured" not only his Son but the world that he refused to abandon into the trash bin. That treasured status would now be offered to the world. Now all those who were sure that they were insignificant seeds, inert and ineffective yeast, buried and forgotten treasure, cheap and worthless pearl and fish ready to be ground into fertilizer are offered a grand and glorious alternative. Those who were sure that they were one man's trash are now not just another man's treasure but delightfully and wonderfully . . . Divine Treasure!

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) – "Seen"

Given the great good news of this great divine reversal, we get to believe that it is true. We now understand what God has done in Jesus is "for us." We have been told in spite of appearances

to the contrary, that because of Jesus, when God “sees” us, he no longer “sees” trash but treasure.

When we believe that we have been so “seen,” it transforms our self-understanding. Because we believe that we have been so “seen,” we see ourselves differently. Believing that we are not trash but treasure makes all the difference in the world. We may have felt like a tiny and insignificant seeds, but now we are the seeds of something grand and mighty (“the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches”). We may have thought we were weak and ineffective, but now we can be the mysterious power that works behind the scenes, defying the odds, making a huge difference far beyond our small numbers (“like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour,” an incredible amount, 1.125 bushels, 144 cups, 40 loaves of bread!). “Seen” not as trash but as treasure, believing that we are not cheap costume jewelry but one-of-kind pearls of great value, our lives are radically re-prioritized. We are willing to risk everything and let go of all the other trash we once thought was treasure because of our new found identity (“like a treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field . . . like a merchant . . . on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it”). “Seen” not as just another worthless piece of shark bait but as the finest King Crab and the most succulent shrimp cocktail, we bask in our honored status and blessed fate. In the End, we can be sure that we will not be “bad” and thrown out but “good” and gathered in.

Such are the benefits of faith!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – “Displayed”

When my mother returned from a particularly successful rummage sale, she proudly displayed her brilliant purchases. She

triumphantly showed off not a pile of junk and what some of us were convinced was stuff only fit for the trash-bin but her precious collection of rare treasures that you thought she wanted to display in her very own personal art museum.

We get to do the same. Once God has surprised us in Jesus Christ and we have seen that we are not trash but treasure, we can't help but say "Yes." We can't help but rejoice in this new state of affairs. We can't wait to show-and-tell. We can't wait to display for all to behold and see how everything has changed in Jesus Christ.

Through such faith in Christ we now are brilliant scribes "trained for the kingdom." We are able to see what remains hidden to those who do not have the eyes of faith. As scribes of the kingdom we are able to open and display the Gospel treasures of the Bible. For those without such faith the Bible remains a bewildering complexity of moralisms, only so much worthless trash that always seems to condemn and confuse. But we are able to display the gracious promises of God ("like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old") and thereby able open the mysteries of the Bible in new, exciting and faith-creating ways. What had once been worthless trash is now priceless treasure.

Putting the Kingdom on display also means that our lives become living displays of the up-side-down, inside-out world of the Kingdom of God. What looks risky and foolish is now wise and prudent. We are willing to lay down our lives and take up risks that only make us look like fools to the rest of the world. But believing what we do, we are willing to risk all and let go of everything in order to take hold of the hidden treasure and pearl of great price. We might seem like tiny and insignificant seeds, but we know what God has in store for us. Our numbers might be few, but we know how God will use us to leaven the

world. And many will be surprised to see how we change the world in ways that far outstrip our size and importance. Miraculously the stewardship of our lives and this world helps others who had been blind now to see that they too are not trash but treasure in the eyes of God.