

“Treasure Hidden in a Field” / Matthew 13:33, 44-47, 51-53 / 27 July 2014

Knead a pinch of yeast into a lump of bread dough. Stumble across the finest pearl you've ever seen. Come upon buried treasure while plowing someone else's field, then, instead of just stealing it, go and sell all you own in order to buy that field. It changes everything, absolutely everything, but it also costs you everything. It entails risk. These parables of Jesus are word pictures about discovery, trade-offs, risks. When was the last time you took a really worthwhile risk?

Well, what's a 'worthwhile risk'? What's a good gamble? My career as a gambler was brief and unfulfilling. Long ago, I gathered with several hundred other missionaries of our denomination at a conference in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. You'd be crazy to go to Zimbabwe nowadays. In my opinion, travel to rogue states like that does not fall under the category of a “worthwhile risk.” But this was back in the year 2000, just as things were really starting to fall apart in that African nation. I have fond memories of my time there. Zimbabwe was nothing like the mud hut villages where many of us worked. It was “Africa-lite” with ATMs, air-conditioning, good roads, and modern chain restaurants. Victoria Falls was truly spectacular, like the Grand Canyon with lush vegetation and falling water, sending its spray up hundreds of feet into the air. These days, of course, tourists stay on the Zambia side of the river. Nobody crosses into Zimbabwe. But back in those days, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, still had grand luxury hotels...and decadent casinos.

Now I don't know how it happens, but somehow I have a tendency at conferences to fall in with the group comedian. This was more true when I was young, but it still happens. I end up sitting beside the guy who always has a smart remark, and I become what they call, in comedy, the “straight man,” the less humorous sidekick to the class clown, as Abbott was to Costello. This happened at Victoria Falls, and the funny guy happened to be a Canadian missionary assigned to some hardship post in far-flung Mozambique. He was about my age and temperament, so we gravitated toward each other. I soon discovered that my Canadian friend loved not only humor; he also loved to gamble. “Come with me to the casino. I'm going to show you how to play the slots.”

I followed the guy, halfheartedly, to a casino, dropped a few Zimbabwean dollars into a machine and got nothing. I wouldn't have given up so easily if anything about the place appealed to me, but it did not. The garish, overblown statues of African kings, the cacophony of ringing bells and twittering machines, the secondhand smoke. And even there at the edge of world, on the verge of a natural wonder that I could gaze upon for hours, even there the casino was filled with elderly ladies with walkers, risking it all on the chance of getting rich. The place made me sad. Soon enough, I strayed back to the swimming pool and left my friend to spend the evening there.

The week went on in that way. “Swing by my room before dinner,” my Canadian friend would say. I stopped by to find him passed out beside a nearly empty bottle of whiskey with a lovely young African woman sitting on the floor, watching his TV. At dinner, when my friend started speaking Mozambican Portuguese to all the baffled, English speaking Zimbabwean waiters, I knew that he'd skipped out on the conference to spend the day at the casino...with its free drinks. By the end of the week in Victoria Falls, he had lost all his money at the casino and had to borrow \$50 off me just to make it to payday once he returned to his post in Mozambique. I haven't seen or heard from that missionary in fourteen and a half years, and he still owes me \$50.

But that one day in Zimbabwe is the sum total of my whole gambling career. I didn't think it was wrong, or bad, or indulgent. I just didn't see the appeal. Some twenty-five years ago, back when I first joined the Presbyterian Church, the General Assembly of the denomination issued a very strong statement about the evils of gambling. “It's bad stewardship,” they said. “It tears families apart. It takes needless risks with precious financial resources that ought to be dedicated to the service of God and humankind. All our resources are on loan from on high,” the General Assembly intoned. “Gambling is bad.” My fundamentalist Methodist family was amused. “Oh,” they said to me. “For Presbyterians, it's okay to drink. You turn a blind eye to abortion. It's okay to believe in evolution and go to church only once a week. Some of your clergy have been known to drop unmentionable words

right into their sermons, and we know we saw your pastor smoking a cigarette on the sidewalk right outside the church of a Sunday morning! Everyone knows half your clergy are divorced women who hate men, and another half are gay men,” they said. “But heaven forbid that you place a little wager on the Steelers game against the Browns!”

And yet, Jesus is telling us in this string of parables that the kingdom of heaven is a gamble, a costly risk. It's the living dream that costs you everything...but it's worth more than all we give. Look at Jesus' picturesque parables in Matthew 13, for these simple little word pictures of first century Palestinian life are themselves hidden treasures. Just like treasure buried in a field, you can only unearth their wonder, their depth, if you take the time to dig for them, meditating long on their imagery and simple poetry: leaven in a lump of dough, a perfect pearl, treasure hidden in a field. In Jesus' poetic imagination, each of these things has the power to alter everything. These are word pictures about discovery and risk. Risk! What has your life known of risk, a true, meaningful, worthwhile gamble?

Jesus' shorter parables are puddles in the road. They look so shallow and small that you're tempted to jump over them, but if you do dip a foot in, you end up swimming. They're deceptively simple at first glance, but strangely profound. It's too bad the gospel writer Matthew lists these word pictures in rapid fire, in quick succession, because each of them merits slow rumination. They're composed for the imagination and more for the ear than the eye. Their wisdom will wash right over you unless you pause with them, dwell on them, allow them to capture not your newspaper-reading mind, but your creative mind. You hear them with the same ear you would use in listening to poetry. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven in a ball of bread dough; it's like a drag net that catches all varieties of fish; it's like a pearl so perfect and so beautiful that you sell all you have just to possess it. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field; you accidentally discover it, and then you sell all that you have, all that is yours, and you buy that field.” The kingdom, that's to say the meaningful life, the unseen life, the life hidden away from the first glance but rich and full, the best life—“the kingdom of heaven”—is risky. It costs us everything, but then it gives so much more than it takes.

What costly risk has given you everything you know of joy, and satisfaction, and contentment? What has been your life's most worthwhile gamble? The problem with so much of life is that we invest in things that cost us little, and then we're disappointed when they give us little in return. But we run risks every day—whether they're worth it or not. The great white shark documentary that's showing at the I-Max theater on the North Side right now assures its viewers that there's a greater risk of getting into a car accident en route to the beach than there is of being attacked by a shark once you get in the water. There are risks we take without batting an eye. We're putting our lives into the hands of many a stranger when we get behind the wheel: our auto manufacturer, our mechanic, truck drivers who drink Red Bull energy drinks instead of sleeping, the drivers of other cars; Penn-DOT. Locomotion is a gamble that we just take, and it has been known to cost people everything. But it's not exactly the risk I mean.

Speaking of auto accidents: A man was rushing his pregnant wife off to the hospital to deliver twins, but he was in such a hurry that he got into an accident and woke up in the hospital. As his vision cleared, he saw his brother sitting beside his hospital bed. “Omigosh,” he cried. “Where's my wife? Is she okay? What about the babies?” “Don't worry about a thing,” the brother said. “Your wife is fine, and the babies were born yesterday. They're healthy and well. But while you were still passed out, and your wife was too, they came in asking what to call the babies on their birth certificates. I hope you don't mind, but I had to name your kids for you.” “Oh,” the man replied. “Well, what did you name my children?” The brother replied, “I named the girl Denise.” “Denise,” the man said, “that's not bad. I can live with Denise.” And so he asked, “What did you name my son?” The brother shrugged and said, “I called him Denepew.”

There's opportunity hidden in each new moment. There's potential for happiness or sorrow in each hour of the day. The world can turn on a dime with a single phone call from the doctor or the

police. No life is without risk, no matter how safely we play our cards. You're taking risks when you make investments, no matter how conservative. You're rolling the dice when you take on a mortgage, committing yourself to a monthly payment despite the fact that you have no idea what the next thirty years will bring. It's risky to spend seven years in the classroom, aiming for a career that you may not like or be good at. If you exercise, you run the risk of injury; if you don't exercise, you run all kinds of risks. But none of these is the kingdom of heaven.

Have you ever noticed that everything in your life wants to be your first priority? Oh, there are many passions that will consume you if you let them, if you give yourself over to them—and passion is always risk. Each facet of your life is crying out to be the first of all your scattered priorities. Just go to the Internet and take a look at all the blogs that people keep. Any subject in your life, any peripheral activity that you engage in: there is someone out there who is so obsessed with that one thing that he or she keeps a blog about it. Most people cook, but only some maintain a website about it. Most of us dabble in some form of gardening, but for some folks, gardening is the joy that makes them whole. They just have to write about it. We all admire a handsome bird from time to time, or cock our head to hear a pleasant bird song. But birdwatchers are as serious about their passion as bridge-players or soccer fans. There are blogs about restoring old houses, and though I am always restoring some broken-down-thing in my old house, it's not my passion. It's just one of many occupations. There are blogs about kayaking, hiking, parenting, exercising, owning dogs, owning cats, preaching, praying, believing, doubting. These are all things I do, but which of them would I give up all the others to possess in its fullness? Music, art, genealogies, pornography, alcohol—all these things will gladly ascend the throne of your life and claim your full allegiance. Which one will it be? Which one is the treasure buried in the field; which one would you allow to consume everything you are? Which interest, which love, is worthy of all that risk?

“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.” The key words here are “in his joy” and “all he has.” What great joy causes you to risk all that you have for it? What mission project, what quest for truth, what social issue of our day? What is your pearl of great price, the one worthwhile thing of goodness, or truth, or beauty for which you'd risk all others? Perhaps you can answer the question. Perhaps you can honestly say that the Haiti Water Purification Project has stolen your heart. Or maybe you find greatest meaning in serving as a deacon. It could be that Christian education is your thing, or Produce to People, or Family Promise, or the beautification of our sacred space. Making music in worship is risky stuff; it's nerve-racking, and directing the church's finances always feels like a gamble. But whatever it is, you've never failed to find a sense of joy even in the drudgery of it all.

Perhaps you haven't found any treasure in the fields you've been plowing around here? The thing that gives you deepest joy isn't part of what we do at this church; in which case, maybe the risk you're called to take is to introduce it to us. Or perhaps you just really haven't found any treasure worth risking yourself for. And if that's the case, then there's only one thing to do: Pick up a shovel, and start digging. There are causes, there are people, there are activities and projects that will not disappoint you. There are issues that are worthy of all your life's great energies and risks, and the kingdom of heaven is in them. They will cost you everything, but then they will give you far more than they ever take. These parables of Jesus are word pictures about discovery, trade-offs, risks. When was the last time you took a really worthwhile risk? Amen.