



KINGDOM EPIPHANIES

The Paradox: Finding & Purchased

January 14, 2024

Prelude – Grace Alone by Dustin Kensrue

WELCOME (cards & community) |

Good morning, all! I'm so glad we can gather together this morning as the church. Church is more than events like this, though we value such times together. Church is more than the programs and practices that help us follow Jesus, as invaluable as such aids have proven to be. No, church, as our scriptures tell it and our Savior establishes it, is a community, a people who, together, as spiritual companions in gospel communities, are following him, not just for their personal faith but for the perfecting (making whole and holy) all the world, which includes our daily lives, careers, callings, siblings, spouses, the needy and the neighbor.

To be the church, that's the aim of our worship together, to set our mind's attention and hearts' affections upon Jesus so that we might follow him together through the ups and downs of our Father's kingdom come and will being done in the ordinary days between this one. And **so we come together, on this day made for us to rest and to remember whose and who we are in Jesus.**

So, for those new with us, we are glad you're here, and we'd like to invite you to church into the relationships that make the church truly a faith family through Jesus. **Your first step would be to fill out one of the little black cards found on the table when you first walked in.** You can drop them off in the jar on that table or one of the little boxes at the back of the chapel. And a great time to do this would be in just a few minutes when we dismiss our kiddos back to their particular time and place for worship!

Speaking of a time and place for worship, will you join me in settling our hearts and minds upon the truth that God is with us, here and now, as we enter into worship through scripture and song, conversation, and communion? Pray with me.

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 84:1-7

What a beautiful home, God-of-the-Angel-Armies! We've always longed to live in a place like this, Always dreamed of a room in your house, where we could sing for joy to God-alive! How blessed they are to live and sing there! And **how blessed all those in whom you live, whose lives become roads you travel;** We wind through lonesome valleys, come upon brooks, discover cool springs and pools brimming with rain! God-traveled, these roads of life together in Jesus curve up the mountain, and at the last turn—Zion! God in full view!

SONG #1 – Place to Land by Mission House (Ray/Leonhardt)

SONG #2 – I Set My Hope on Jesus (Hymn for a Deconstructing Friend) by Getty/Papa

Dismiss Kids

CALL BACK & ANNOUNCEMENTS | Commitment Cards & Kingdom Epiphanies

As you return to your seats, I wanted to remind you to grab a pen, a reflection card, and one of the 2024 commitment cards if you haven't already turned yours in. As we've mentioned the last several weeks, we've asked you to help our family steward our resources and responsibilities by filling out a **2024 Giving Commitment Card**. You can turn those in today if you have them. And if you have not filled one out, please do so. In order to know what we have and need, we'll need everyone (individual or family) to complete a commitment. As always, if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask.

Speaking of asking questions, doing so is essential to maturing in our faith. The presumption of apprentices is not that they would merely sit silently observing the master. However, there certainly are moments for that, yet, as we see throughout the accounts of life with Jesus, apprenticeship or discipleship is experiential learning, prodding and probing the master for the how-to's, whats, and whys.

In fact, until modern, post-enlightenment education models became the norm, dialogical learning, education through questions and answers, coupled with observation and built on the rudiments of memorization and interaction with historical thought, was the primary means of equipping the next generation to continue in both tradition and progression. In other words, to mature mentally, vocationally, communally, and in their faith.

Today will continue in the tradition of asking questions, joining with Jesus' first disciples asking,

"Why do you speak to them in parables?" (Matthew 13:10)

And then, listening to Jesus' response, we'll do what the first disciples were encouraged to do and indeed did; we'll ask questions together!

You can turn to Matthew 13 in your bible if you'd like. And then pray with me as _____ comes to read Jesus' reply.

PRE-SERMON READING | Matthew 13:34-35, 52

All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet:

"I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world."

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him...And he said to them,

"Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

(Matthew 13:34-35, 52)

SERMON | Finding & Purchased

To be called a “scribe...trained for the kingdom of heaven” is no small thing, especially for a group of primarily basically educated persons, none of whose vocational training was in that admirable field.

Scribes, in the Jewish tradition, whose name means “writers,” began mainly as clerks to kings and governing officials whose function was to copy royal and sacred manuscripts. Later, the title signified the official post of one learned in the Law of Moses. According to one source, “The people admired the scribes' erudition (their great knowledge and learning) and their interpretations of precedents and tradition.”¹

As we see throughout the gospel accounts, “the scribes,” along with the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Sanhedrin, formed a type of aristocracy in first-century Palestine. And while they often find themselves in opposition to Jesus, there is no doubt that the disciples would consider becoming a person referred to as a scribe, one of great knowledge and the wisdom of interpretation of the Kingdom of God, as a culmination, a terminus, a perfection/completion/maturation of a holy and honorable aspiration. The fulfillment, in a way, of their apprenticeship.

The Kingdom of God, life with Him, life lived in His presence and towards His purposes, “on the one hand,” says priest and poet Malcolm Guite, “is sheer grace, all achieved *for us*, and, if we will let him, achieved *in us* by Christ” Jesus, “on the other hand,” continues Guite, “to find it, to recognize it, to yearn for it, is to let go of everything else.”²

So, why does Jesus tell parables? To train his disciples to become scribes, people of knowledge and wisdom, but not general knowledge or wisdom, but specific and sharable knowledge and wisdom of the kingdom of heaven.

The Kingdom of God, life with Him, a life lived in His presence and towards His purposes, though experienced as a conversion, a turning to, is, as we learned last Sunday, actually a return home to our natural state, whom we are made to be and what we are made for. Plain and simple, real, full, and forever life, is the experience of living with God and God living in us. Yet, as another poet³ put it, while the Kingdom of God may be

“A condition of complete simplicity / Costing not less than everything” (T.S. Elliot)

And there is the central paradox, the seemingly contradictory reality, of life with God: admission is free and frees us of all we have. Life with God is where our true selves and purpose are found, and at the same time, it is the place we lose ourselves in our finding.

Perhaps because such truth, while straightforward enough to express, is not always easy to live, Jesus offers us more than general information and generic how-to's. Recognizing our limited imagination, our inability to see through faith more than what is in front of us, Jesus offers us stories, verbal images constituted of the very things in front of us—money, labor, leaven, land, etc.—but containing in these spoken portraits the very *means* to the very simplicity which our souls long.

Parables don't define, diagram, or systematize; they describe. The word pictures force the synopsis in our brains to create images of the description. Images that, if we are attentive to the descriptions, never look quite like they might if we were to only glance over them. There is always something a bit off about Jesus' parabolic depictions. Something is missing or out of place; if we move too quickly through it, our mind's eye would habitually fill in or

¹ Encyclopedia.Com accessed [here](#).

² Malcolm Guite, *Lifting The Veil*, 87.

³ T.S. Elliot, “Little Gidding,” in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 200.

correct it. This is why, on occasions like today, we need to work our way into the stories slowly, use that divinely gifted faculty of imagination, do the work of faith by listening to the voice of the good shepherd who brings us home, and see the eyes of the Helper who convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Or, in the words of Jesus in Matthew 13:

To you it has been given to know the secrets [mystery] of the kingdom of heaven...to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have in abundance...blessed are your eyes, for they see, and for your ears, for they hear... (Matthew 13:11-12, 16)

This morning, we will enter one of Jesus' briefest parables. A story found in a chapter full of stories, in which, as Matthew tells us and ___ read for us moments ago, is Jesus' consistent way of letting people in on his person and purpose, and their own. In Matthew chapter 13, there are no less than seven parables. Two, Jesus explains because the disciples, like all apprentices and children, prefer the answer to the process of learning. Five Jesus spoke with the expectation that those open to life with God could get in on depth within, not just once but over and over again, in ways new and old.

Knowing our tendency is to skip the process of maturing/learning/growing/experiencing and just get to the center-of-the-tootsie-pop, let's take a moment before we read what is probably a familiar story to close our eyes and take in three long, deep breaths. With each breath in, picture inhaling the Spirit of God with us, hold it for three seconds, and on the exhale, imagine expelling our distractions—fear, anxiety, boredom, apathy, confusion, perceived assumptions, pride, etc.

After the third breath, ask the Holy Spirit for ears to hear and eyes to see as we imagine ourselves in the middle of the Word of God, the spoken parable of Jesus.

I'll give you a moment, and then I'll read the parable. When I do, keep your eyes closed or look at the floor. Inevitably, your mind will wander. When you feel your mind leaving the story, come back to attention with three deep breaths, breathing in Christ's presence and breathing out whatever is distracting.

Jesus speaking,

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Matthew 5:44)

You've probably heard that story before, but even if you have not, your mind has already created an image of what is happening, filling in everything from the details of the field (perhaps a wild meadow, maybe an empty lot, or a tilled plot). But more than that, your mind has started to fill in the details of the treasure, of the discovery hidden (in the ground, or is it in a barn, or under a pile of trash?) and then the morality of re-hiding the discovery (moving it to another spot, is that shady or not?) and then all the efforts necessary to liquidate your possessions to (with a straight face and not giving away the secret) purchase the field and all its contents. Do you see it?

Okay, stay there in that image, but let me see if I can help bring some clarity and focus. With your eyes still closed, imagine yourself as a person of modest means. More specifically, a farmer. You have the basics and perhaps a little more to call your own. A few possessions and assets of value are yours out right, but like most in your community, you work another's property, giving them a percentage of the yield. The land is yours in sweat but not on paper.

- What's life like working for yourself in some way, but also always for someone else? What's life like getting by? Having some, but always needing something more? Do you hope for more in life? Is it a wishful hope, one that keeps you checking the "Secret Spin ID" to see if you won, or a sure hope that you'll experience more than what you have because you've got the plan, you're putting in the work?

Most days, you go to the field to do the daily and seasonal tasks. You till the field, sow the seeds, observe and care for the crop as best you can, harvest when it is time, and plow it over to start again, hoping and waiting between the times for the growth and the yield. Because you work the field and check the fences to keep the grazers out or in, you know the curvature of the land, how it rolls and where it is flat, where water pools, and how the sun hits and the trees shade. Again, it's your place of labor and profit, perhaps even love or maybe loathing, though it is not wholly yours.

- Look around. What do you see? What's the shape and layout of the field? Are there woods on any side? Where's the entrance? Is there anything growing in the field this time of year?
- What do you hear? Are there any animals out this morning? Are any neighbors at work?
- What do you smell? The freshness of morning dew on the grass? The recognizable stench of the neighbor's herd?
- Is there anything unfamiliar?

You've walked this field hundreds of times. Worked it for years. You hardly expect to discover anything new beyond a fresh collection of animal tracks or a sagging fence line where the neighbor's bull keeps testing the boundaries. But today, something catches your eye — a reflection of a shiny object. Maybe it's a piece of metal off the old tractor or some baling wire, but the glimmer is much brighter than something so common. You step off your usual route for a closer look and discover a chunk of gold bar protruding from the ground, washed clean by the prior evening's rain.

- What's your first thought at the discovery? Do you think it's real? How could something like this be in a place so familiar, and you didn't know?

You dig the gold bar out of the rain-softened ground. Now, in your muddy hands, you realize it's bigger than you thought and heavier. Maybe this is real gold; you finally allow yourself to believe. To your surprise, you notice that under the bar, muted by the dirt, is another bar. You hear the neighboring farmer crank up his tractor in the distance, reminding you of the work that brought you here this morning, but your heart is racing too fast to consider just going on with your day as usual. You grab the shovel you keep to dig yourself out of ruts and start digging out your now-only half-buried treasure. Soon, you discover that there are more bricks than you can count!

- What emotions are you feeling? Excitement, relief, nervousness?

This discovery has already changed your life and has the potential to do so in ways you cannot even yet imagine.

You know the field has changed hands dozens of times over the years by the various distant inheritors and absentee investors. The person you are leasing from now seems nice enough, though their distance and lack of labor suggest they were as aware of the treasure as you were just an hour before. Whoever's treasure this was has been gone for a long time, and none of their heirs have returned to even look for it. What will you do with the treasure?

Neither it nor the field is yours, so you can't just haul it away in hopes no one will notice. You could take out one brick at a time, but if you start taking gold bars to the bank, people will wonder where you got it, and then you'll have to turn over your find. You can't just have this treasure a little at a time any more than you could walk away with it at this moment.

An idea strikes you. What if I buy the field? If I did, the treasure would be mine outright, without dispute. If the owner sells the field, it's evident that the treasure wasn't theirs. But how can you buy the field?

Saving is hard; what you've put away is barely enough to cover more than a few months' expenses. You don't have enough credit for such a quick and significant purchase. But you do have an average home, a reasonably reliable truck, and a collection of other goods under your roof. Maybe, just maybe, if you sell everything, all your keepsakes, family heirlooms, and all your everyday utensils, you can afford to buy the field.

You bury the gold bars in the farthest corner from the county road, packing down the dirt and covering it with some fallen brush to ensure it remains hidden.

You decide the trade-out is worth it. Really, it's no decision at all. Even with all the good memories, emotions, and usefulness of your possessions, you joyfully, without hesitation, liquidate your life. Your friends and family are unsure what is going on, but you know that what looks like a crazy abandonment will change your life, *and* theirs forever.

You keep working the field. Day after day, doing what needs to be done to ensure, at least for your part, that the next harvest will be what it needs to be. In a month, everything is gone. Through a realtor friend, your house is sold to a flipper for cash. The truck was bought by a neighbor who thought he could keep it running well enough for his soon-to-be sixteen-year-old to mud around in. A series of yard sales and Facebook posts ensured that the remainder of your belongings, even your most precious ones, have returned enough cash to purchase the field you once thought was only a place to make a basic life. On the day of closing on your purchase, which cost every penny you had, including your emergency rutt shovel, you borrow a shovel from your dad and start digging.

- What does it feel like to uncover what is now yours, a treasure that cannot be taken from you?
- What will be different about your life, about you?
- And here is a question: what will you do with the field now that you've found more in it than you ever knew?

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION | Responding to the Light of Jesus

The Kingdom of God, life with Him, a life lived in His presence and towards His purposes, a life in which we are home with Him, in which our lives are His, the roads He travels as the psalmist and ____ declared for us; is truly good news! A reality, a way of life, of the most incredible wealth, worth the joyful abandonment of everything we presume is necessary for life, because it is in the very place where a life is made.

- Have you discovered the treasure of life with God for yourself?
- Where was it hidden?

Reflect quietly for a few moments, then process with those around you what you have heard and have seen through the process of becoming “scribes, trained in the kingdom of heaven” by the Son of God Himself.

SONG #3 – Found It All by Leslie Jordan

COMMUNION |

For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then we also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:3-4)

Jesus gave his body to be broken so that ours might be made whole. Gave his life for us so that He might live in us. We have found our life in His, and in His life we live.

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Christ's body and blood: for us, they were given.

This bread and this cup tell us we're forgiven.

We have found our life in His,

And in His life, we live.

Amen

SONG #4 – God Be by Chris Renszema

BENEDICTION | Colossians 1:26-29

As we rest in the day made for us, we prepare to enter into the work for which we are made [**LIGHT THE CANDLE**], remembering:

This mystery has been kept in the dark for a long time, but now it's out in the open. God wanted everyone...to know this rich and glorious secret inside and out, regardless of their background, regardless of their religious standing. The mystery in a nutshell is just this: Christ is in you, so therefore you can look forward to sharing in God's glory. It's that simple. That is the substance of our Message. We preach *Christ*, warning people not to add to the Message. We teach in a spirit of profound common sense so that we can bring each person to maturity. To be mature is to be basic. Christ! No more, no less. That's what we're working so hard at day after day, year after year, doing our best with the energy God so generously gives us.