

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Being Found
Romans 8:26
July 30, 2023

Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like a pearl that a merchant finds and sells everything he has to obtain it. He also says the Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a person discovers and then sells everything he has to obtain it. These short, little stories, these little snippets open a world to us, imagination about how Jesus views what is most valuable and what we can indeed obtain what's worth our whole lives. We've been given the gift of sitting with in Lectio Divina the little story we might call The Pearl of Great Price. Let us also consider the little story just next to it, the Kingdom of Heaven's like a treasure hidden in a field.

Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like treasure hidden in a field. A person discovers it and then sells everything he has to buy the field in order to obtain the treasure. Consider with me of all scripture like a vast, varied geography. In the Scripture, there are awe-inspiring mountains that lift our eyes heavenward, and there are dark valleys, regions that are largely unexplored; There are paths that feel so familiar you know the way with your eyes closed; there are forests for shade on hot days. Somewhere in this sacred geography is a field, and in that field is a treasure of immense value, worth everything to hold on to it. What I want to say to us today is Romans chapter 8 is that treasure.

Today we have heard read in our presence the final section of the 8th chapter of Romans. It is a breathtaking assurance of God's presence, strength, support, and above all, love for all of us. In the end, we pray to be able to join the Apostle Paul in the confidence to say, "We are more than conquerors. . . I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The love of God embodied in Christ Jesus makes us inseparable from God, embraced in divine intimacy, free from condemnation, held in the divine heart like a parent clings to a child with all her heart as if to hold on to the child and the moment of embrace forever.

These are not just platitudes for the already self-assured of their righteousness before God, for the hashtag blessed. This is a lifeline for the drowning, oxygen for the suffocating, solid rock for the falling. The scope is cosmic. All creation is in travail, groaning for relief. We suffer and groan inwardly, too. When we do, we are assured, the Spirit intercedes for us, Jesus intercedes for us, the love of God is unbreakable. If there are days or seasons, when it seems the cosmic forces of evil or fate or karma are aligned against you; there is an eternity when God is for you, and nothing can take that away.

This passage is a treasure and discovering a treasure is a delight. In 2010, a man named Forrest Fenn who lived in Santa Fe, New Mexico, published a book called *The Thrill of the Chase*. In it,

he told stories about his early life and experiences as a pilot in the Air Force and amateur artifact collector. He wrote about his cancer scare in the late 1980's when he faced a terminal prognosis. Yet, he survived. And years later, acted out a dream he had in those tenuous days. He assembled an honest-to-goodness treasure chest, gold coins, ancient bracelets, jewels, valued up to \$2 Million. In his book, he described the chest in all detail, and then said, "I have hidden it somewhere in the Rocky Mountains." Whoever finds it, it's yours. A poem included in the book offered 9 cryptic clues about the location of the treasure. The last stanza reads:

*So hear me all and listen good,
Your effort will be worth the cold.
If you are brave and in the wood,
I give you title to the gold.*

As word spread about this, thousands of people searched for the treasure box from New Mexico to Canada. Up to 350,000 people, it's estimated at one point or another searched somewhere in the west. Some of their motivation was purely material—the chest created instant wealth for the finder. But even more was chasing the thrill in a real-life treasure hunt. This is the experience Jesus captures in just a few words. The Kingdom of God is like a treasure, hidden, and then you find it right below your feet.

Fenn's treasure was real, despite the doubters. For 10 years people searched. Five people died in their search. On June 6, 2020, the treasure was found in Wyoming by a medical student from Michigan. To this day, he has yet to reveal the location where the treasure was discovered. We may never know. Forrest Fenn, the one who hid the treasure, died six months after the treasure was discovered. Isn't it alluring to think that somewhere in the vast, wild geography of the west, there's still a small hole in the ground that once held a treasure that changed the lives of everyone captivated by it.

I heard it said recently that preaching on Romans 8 really begins with one goal—simply that the congregation would know this passage is here and where to find it, because there will come a time when every person will need it. We need this passage because we need even more the Spirit to help us in our weakness. Here's the treasure.

In Romans 8, we end as "more than conquerors," but we begin as anything but. We begin as less than failures, less than stumblers, less than sinners, less than those who are lost and can't find the way, less than those who are blinded, searching for some light, less than those who are angry, hurt, anxious, lonely and need someone, need something to help us. It's the help we need. No wonder monks all around the world begin and end their daily ritual of prayers early in the morning and late in the evening with Psalm 70: "O Lord, come to my assistance. Come quickly to help me." Paul says we don't even know how to pray.

That's the verdict that gets to the heart of it. We don't even know how to pray. Prayer, here, isn't the articulate thoughtfully crafted poetic utterances of piety, though poetic prayers can lift the heart and spark the spiritual imagination. Prayer here isn't the right posture or the right

warm feeling, though getting lost in prayer for many is the beginning of a contemplative life. Prayer here isn't being able to unlock some kind of passcode of getting God to give what you want to get.

Prayer here is fundamentally intimacy with God when you're all alone in the world. That's what we don't know how to do, and yet, it's not only what we need the most; it's what we're made for: intimacy with the Creator, a closeness that fills all of life with God's presence, no matter the circumstances. We were made, created in it and for it and yet, have lost it somewhere along the way.

When Paul says, we don't know how to pray as we ought, this is a mirror of the whole human condition. On our own, we don't know how to be in relationship with God, this is our weakness. Yet, in Christ, it is the beginning of grace. When we are weak, God is strong. When we know we have nothing to give and don't even know where to begin, we are then finally open to God.

All of scripture testifies to this: the Spirit intercedes for us. Jesus intercedes for us. Intercede, intercession means you are not alone, ever. I'm with you until the end of the age; I'm for you when the whole world has gone dark; I'm on your side to bring your whole life, your hopes and fears into God's light, your regrets and shames, your strengths and weaknesses, all of it before the God of grace. These are not platitudes for the already self-assured. These are promises for the devastated, the fearful, the worst. Have you ever thought to yourself: I am weak. The Spirit helps us in our weakness. Have you ever thought: I am the worst. The Spirit helps us in our worst-ness. Have you ever thought: I am the very best. You're on your own, for now at least. But bookmark the chapter, remember the treasure because there will come a day, eventually. There always does.

I had known him for a long time. His is one story of so many like it. He was in and out of my life in and out over the years. In that time, I'd come to know a bit about him, and wondered about him even more, whether I knew the whole story. He came to me one day and said, "I've known you for a long time. I was going to come to ask you for some help again and had a little story to tell you to make you feel sorry for me. But when I got to the church, everything changed. I felt God say to me, no, not this time. Tell him the truth. So, I'm here to tell you the truth. For 40 years, I've been a liar and a cheat. I've stolen; I've swindled. I've told stories to make people feel sorry for me so I could get something from them. I've lied to you."

"I kind of knew that," I replied. I just didn't know which parts were true or not.

"But you still gave me the benefit of the doubt," he said.

"Ya, I suppose," I said.

He said, "you know, I'm sorry that I can't even go to church. When I go, I don't understand what's happening. It's kind of boring. Sorry, does that make sense to you?"

"A little," I said. "You know, it seems like you're speaking the truth today, a deeper truth that you've spoken in a long time."

He said, "Things have changed. They have to change. I've wrecked my life and everyone around me. Now my marriage is over, I've lost my job, I'm estranged from my children. I don't have any more friendships, I've lost my house—I have no place to sleep. I've lost everything, I've hurt everyone. I've hit rock bottom."

"Is this rock bottom?" I asked.

He said, "the only place to go down from here is hell, and I can see if from here. This is the bottom."

I said, "Well, there's one thing about hitting rock bottom, you've hit rock, and you know what the Bible says about the rock. The rock is Jesus. So, this is solid ground you're on now, as low as you can feel. Now, you can begin to stand. You can tell the truth, no matter what shame you feel. You can accept consequences, even painful consequences, because you're living in truth, even painful truth. And in time, by God's grace, maybe you can make some things right with the people in your life." He wept.

We prayed together, and I honestly didn't know what would happen after that. I knew I couldn't fix what he had destroyed. He couldn't fix what he had wrecked, and he knew it, too. I gave him some money for food and gas with a plan we talked through to go around town applying for jobs. That's about all I knew to do. And I knew words to pray, I knew what my heart was. And so did he. We both prayed for redemption, each in our own words. But really I didn't know how to pray because I didn't have the imagination to even ask God for what happened next. I didn't pray for it because I didn't imagine it.

He called me a couple days later. He said he had talked with an old friend in another city who said, "I've been waiting years for this call. If you're serious about getting your life together. If you're really serious, come to me, come stay with me. I have a counselor you can talk with. There's a ministry in town that will help you begin to deal with some things. I know a job you can work."

The last thing he said to me was, "I'm heading out of town. I'll see you again I'm sure. I feel like I'm about to be reborn. And I want my story to be told."

The end of his story is yet to be known. But I believe it is being written in grace beyond what I could imagine, a witness to the intercession of the Spirit in ways beyond our comprehension. It reminds me there's another way to hear Jesus' parable, in a way in which we are not a hunter searching for hidden treasure. But we are the treasure, hidden somewhere in a field, lost somewhere in the wilderness. And it is Christ who finds us, no matter how long it takes, and who gives everything for his treasured one. If we are ever more than conquerors of anything, it's in him.

That place of shame or fear in the geography of your life. That dark valley where you've gotten lost or dumped, beaten down by the side of the road. That's where Christ finds you. And forever from then, in your life, that's the spot that marks a treasure, that story and that experience of redemption. We could say it's where the cross marks the spot, but I'm also inclined to remember when a treasure is removed, an empty hole is left behind as witness to what was once there.

An empty hole where the treasure was. An empty hole. Or, we might say, if we think about buried treasure in a slightly different way, an empty tomb.

Amen.

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