

St. Paul's Congregational Church: July 23, 2017, Proper 11A  
 St. Paul's Congregational Church: July 30, 2017, Proper 12A  
 Matthew 13:31-33. 44-52, "Hidden Treasure"  
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Hidden treasure – haven't you dreamed of finding that? I enjoy watching Antiques Roadshow and sometimes there are some real surprises there. I was given an old pitcher, actually an ewer, by one of my father's cousins many years ago – it isn't my taste, I really wasn't fond of it, I never really displayed it. But one year I took it to the appraiser at the Glen Ridge church Antiques Show – wrapped it up in a towel and carried it in. Imagine my shock when he looked at it carefully, described what it was, and then said it was worth at least \$800! I still have it – it's buried in a box, still wrapped in that towel. I still don't especially like it, but I do take better care of it.

And as we emptied my fathers' attic, we found lots of old things – a friend who will do an estate sale there told us that there were some things of value....who knew! And I've learned from some of my antiquing jaunts that some of the things I've carefully saved from my childhood – old Dick and Jane books and readers – have a value that has surprised me. Hidden treasures indeed.

There's something to be said for not throwing anything away, isn't there. My brother still has every matchbox car he ever had – still in the original boxes – and probably some of you can tell stories of your own treasures.

These stories of hidden treasure give us pleasure when we stumble across them, don't they. Maybe that's one reason we can relate to these parables so well – everybody wants to find a hidden treasure – but Jesus tells us there's a cost too. And the question becomes, are we willing to pay the price?

What's your treasure? Can you articulate it?

Finding our treasure won't always be easy – giving up all we have is unsettling, frightening, maybe even painful. It's so easy to keep things as they are – avoiding the pain, the risk of change – but it also keeps us from growth and a feeling of joy. And I truly believe that's what God wants for us – a sense of peace and joy that passes all understanding.

We see this in folks who are considering a major life change – they feel drawn to the change but the price seems so high: leaving familiar routine, perhaps moving away, going into the unknown is disruptive. I remember my own call to ordained ministry – God was working on me for probably 20 years before I responded. Move away to Boston, leave family and friends, my familiar and for the most part, fulfilling job at the bank. That anxiety kept me in place for a long, long time. But once I let go and let God be in charge, I've experienced a joy and fulfillment I didn't know was possible. And I found the treasure that had been there just waiting for my discovery.

God is very patient and persistent. What treasure is God holding in front of you, just waiting for you to discover? The price may be great for sure, but the reward, the joy, is greater.

After the stock market crash a few years ago, a woman I know told her story: it's been a hard year. Along with many other big and small businesses our family business failed too. The things we had spent so much of our lives working for became a burden we had to abandon – we had to make a major change. We sold our home, our piano, our big car.

We found a modest home nearby with less yard to maintain, smaller mortgage payments, smaller utility bills, and fewer rooms to dust. My husband and I found time to do volunteer work again. We found time to enjoy old records of popular and classical music from a time when we laughed and played a lot more.

She continues, throughout this transition we felt God's presence more clearly than ever before. God led us out of materialism and fear and into the joy of simple things like a summer breeze and baby ducks taking the leap of faith into the waves. Now we have time to be better neighbors too. Kindness and happiness do exist. They simply had to wait, buried under empty prizes of worldly success until we were ready to cherish them again.

Churches go through this anxiety, too, don't they.

I know of a church blessed by a pastorate of 27 years. When the pastor retired and left, the congregation missed him deeply and mourned his loss terribly. But it was during the interim period when they came to understand how much they had depended on him, how much they relinquished their duties and responsibilities to him over the years. They realized that though they had accomplished much with but a few lay leaders during this time, they had also missed out on so many opportunities. The congregation is finding new opportunities, new treasures they didn't even know existed. It's taking work, hard work, but they are beginning to experience a new energy, a new joy that goes deeper than what they have felt for a long time. The price has been great – but the reward is even greater.

We experience some of those same feelings of excitement and anxiety here, don't we – this project with the Nutley Family Service Bureau Food Bank has brought a combination of excitement and concern to the surface – but at the same time, I sense, both personally and collectively as church, a willingness to step out in faith to discover the treasures that are here for the finding. A willingness to give something up for a new venture in faith, including cleaning out and organizing years of "stuff" in some of the rooms, a new opportunity for service, new efforts in outreach to care for our neighbors, more use of our building, bringing new people in through the doors. Make no mistake – it can be hard. The cost is great but the reward is greater. And God is with us – that's the promise.

So many times, I think we think of change as the utter abandonment of everything that has gone before. That's not what these parables are teaching, though. Listen again to the parable of the net thrown into the sea: the net caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.

The new brings joy but so does the old, according to the last of the parables we read this morning. And there's the challenge for us – both individually and as church.

People asked me if I regretted waiting so long to respond to the call to ministry – after 25 years in the bank – why then? I realized that all I did in my home church, in my community, in the bank, everywhere, better prepared me for the work I do today. Without those experiences, without those years of learning, my ministry would be very

different. After all that time I was able to sort through the experiences, decide which were worth keeping, and let others go.

Maybe that's our task as church too – there is joy in both the new and the old for sure. For instance – when it comes time for Christmas, nobody wants to go around looking for just new songs to sing. We rejoice in the old familiar carols we know by heart – that's what the beloved old texts and songs mean to us – they are deep in our hearts. But I also remember what happened in the church I served in Middlebury when we introduced a liturgical dance group made up of women and girls from the church on Christmas Eve – their dance was breathtaking in its beauty, telling the story of the Madonna and Child, done to the familiar and lovely “Silent Night.” Something new that year – a new expression of worship – it was awesome.

Because, at the same time, new generations come along with new spiritual needs – the world presents us with new challenges. So we have to go back to our treasure chest of what is old, rummage around, and also pray to God to give us new insight for our time and place. Which of the old treasures should be retired? Kept? Modified?

Friends, we know the church has changed – the world has changed, our community has changed. But our call to share the good news has not changed.

We as church and individuals are called to look for the balance between what is comfortable, what is reassuring, and the familiar mixed with the surprising, the new. We need both. God ministers to us, speaks to us, through both. God is still speaking – we know that. Together, we are called to listen.

Jesus has commanded us to go out into the world to proclaim the good news – this world, our world, now. We are called to proclaim in a way that can be heard. If we don't lay the good news against today's newspaper, we might give people the impression that Christianity is some kind of escape into a fantasy world that has no relationship to where we live today.

Christianity is no escape. It's not easy. There is a cost.

Our newly elected Minister of Justice and Witness, Traci Blackmon, went from General Synod to Washington where she was arrested twice – once in a sit-in with other clergy at Mitch McConnell's office and again at a demonstration at the Capitol. Friday night MSNBC reported on this demonstration and there she was – standing tall in her robe, her stole, and her UCC medallion. Honestly, I was proud to see us represented – yes, there is a cost but there's also a cost, perhaps even higher, for not speaking out to injustice.

Through all this, we believe in the Holy Spirit, the presence of God is with us now, leading us and supporting us and loving us forward into the future.

What a balancing act it is to love what it has been and be ready to embrace what is yet to be given. Both are treasures. And we need both of those treasures in the church – sometimes we need a word from the past – sometimes we need the gift of freshness, of stunning new insight. There's room for both. There's need for both. And I have seen a willingness from the good people of St. Paul's to engage both – and that gives me such joy and hope for the future of our ministry, in spite of anxiety that's also part of moving into the future.

I truly believe that we as individuals, we as a church, as we follow Christ, will discover an abundance of treasure, treasure that is both old and new, and we will want to share unafraid this treasure for all to see and experience.

So let's step forward with the power and centrality of the Holy Spirit in us. It is the Holy Spirit that points us to our treasure and helps us in our desire and search for it. It is the Holy Spirit that intercedes for us. And only through the Holy Spirit are we able to understand the heights and depths and power of our real treasure: the love of God in Jesus Christ. Paul's assurance from his letter the Romans rings as true today as it did when he wrote it so many hundreds of years ago: be of good cheer. Nothing but nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That treasure isn't so hidden, is it. That's the good news and the real joy as we face our futures together, as we go for it! Thanks be to God!

Amen.