Matthew 13:44-46 *Engaging with Joy, Part II: Experience Joy*

***Trading Everything for a House in the Slums***A contractor is employed by the public works department in the city of Chicago. It is his job to go into condemned buildings and secure them before demolition. His latest assignment is a series of old row houses by the lake front. A new casino is moving in and these 150 year-old buildings need to be cleared out of the way.

The man is good at his job, and he makes short work of building after building—finding pressure points and marking any pillars or timbers that might give the building ideas of standing up to the bulldozers. When he’s done with a building, the demolition crew will know exactly how to bring it down in the shortest amount of time.

But one day, the man leaves the site early. He finds the demolition foreman and tells him that he wants the demolition halted. He explains that he wants to buy one of the houses.

This is ridiculous. The foreman is outraged. He’s under a tight deadline. He doesn’t have time for his contractors to suddenly decide they want to get into the real estate business.

But the contractor is determined. He hires a lawyer and he gets an injunction halting all demolition. He goes to the casino and asks them to name their price.

This is absurd. The casino needs all this property. They can’t build a gambling palace around a solitary, 150 year-old tenement. They name an outrageous price. 50 times the actual value of the property. They need this annoying man to go away. But when they name their price, the contractor agrees to it. He promises that they will have their money by the end of the month. Suddenly the casino executives are concerned.

The contractor goes and empties out all his bank accounts. It’s not enough. He tries to take out a loan, but no bank will take a chance on such an obviously worthless piece of property. He sells his house, and his car. He pawns his wife’s jewelry.

Meanwhile, the casino owners decide they need that house down before this man comes up with the money. They go to court to get the injunction lifted. The contractor hires more lawyers and they tie the whole business up in judicial red tape.

By this time, the local press gets wind of the story. Reporters from the Chicago Tribune and the local TV news catch up with the man as he sells his furniture and borrows money from relatives. Everybody loves a story about a little guy taking on the big corporations: Why is he doing it? The man just smiles at the camera and says: “I just really want that house.”

Finally, he scrapes enough money together to meet the casino’s original offer. They never thought he would do it, they really don’t want the money; they try to back out. More court battles follow. Eventually, a judge rules that by making an offer to sell—no matter how serious they were about it—the casino did enter into a contract with the man. He acted in good faith, even if they didn’t, and they must honor the contract.

At long last, the house is his. Its windows are boarded up and the front steps are crumbling. Penniless, he and his wife are living in her parents’ basement and he’s wearing his father-in-law’s suit. The reporters are there as he takes possession and he reveals why the house was so important to him. While he was preparing the house for demolition he found an old desk and some trunks in the attic filled with papers. As it turns out, this house was the one-time home of Abraham Lincoln’s personal secretary. The papers are original drafts of some of Lincoln’s most famous speeches as well as volumes and volumes of personal correspondence from Lincoln’s own hand.

It is the historical find of the century. The largest collection of Lincoln artifacts ever discovered. It is priceless.

The contractor wanted to preserve the house so that he could demonstrate authenticity. He didn’t want anyone accusing him of forgery. And he had told no one about the papers, because he didn’t want to share the treasure. Now that he owns the house, he owns the papers. Anyone who wanted to study the papers—and many would—would have to come through him. He was a very, very rich man.

As the reporters crowded around they asked about his selling everything, his huge legal bills, the way the whole city had decided he was crazy. He looked straight into the camera, and smiling from ear to ear he said: “It was all worth it.”

***Jesus’ Version***I don’t if you recognized it or not—but that’s a story Jesus told. Obviously, Jesus didn’t set any of his stories in Chicago or involve large corporate Casinos—I took a few liberties to modernize it a little—but essentially, this is one of Jesus’ parables: a man finds a tremendous treasure, sacrifices everything he has to obtain it, and finds himself overjoyed when it is finally his.

You can read Jesus’ version of the story in **Matthew 13:44-46:**

**44**"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

 **45**"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. **46**When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

Like many of Jesus parables, these short little stories are about the kingdom of heaven. In other words, Jesus is talking about life in His kingdom, what happens when you believe in Him and become one of His followers. These are stories about having Jesus as Lord and Savior, about seeking to follow Him and live for His glory. This is about being a part of the church of Jesus Christ.

And what I want you to especially pay attention to today are three little words in verse 44: **“in his joy.”** When the man who found the treasure in the field sold all he had in order to acquire a fortune—he did not do so glumly, sadly or reluctantly—he did so joyfully. Because he knew, without a doubt, that the exchange was a good one. He knew that the treasure was worth it.

We are in a brief series we are calling *Engaging With Joy*. As we begin a new church year we are pausing to look at the Hope Church mission statement. For the past dozen years we have said that Hope Church is **here to bring joy to Jesus and to experience joy in Him**. We often shorten that to four words: Bring Joy, Experience Joy.

But we realize that after a while, a mission statement like that can become like wallpaper. That is, you see it so often, you stop noticing it. You get so used to seeing it that you stop thinking about it. Then somebody new comes into the church, and they notice the mission statement, but they aren’t sure what it means. We stop talking about it, and it stops being meaningful.

So we thought we would do a sermon series to talk about what we mean by this mission statement. And in conjunction with it, we are doing workshops between services in which we are talking about how we can live this mission statement out as a church. We even printed these booklets with pages for sermon notes and workshop questions.

And this week, I want to look at the second half of our statement, the part that says we are here to experience joy in Jesus. The idea is that being a part of the church of Jesus Christ is a joyful experience. That God wants us to be joyful. It is our conviction that when we are in a right relationship with Jesus, when we are a part of a church that makes bringing joy to Jesus a priority, then we have found a treasure of indescribable value. We have found something priceless. And we are meant to enjoy it.

Let’slook more carefully at the stories Jesus told. I have three quick points, and then we’ll talk about getting serious about joy.

***Treasure Found***First, **treasure found**. I want you to see that Jesus is a found treasure of incomparable worth, a great treasure of infinite value.

**Matthew 13:44** is a complete parable in one verse.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Ancient Israel, as it is today, was something of a battleground. Lying as it does at the crossroads between Egypt to the southwest, Europe to the northwest, and the rich lands of Persia to the East; Israel tended to take the brunt of nearly every conquering army. Whether it was King Nebuchudnezzer and the Babylonians or Alexander the Great and the Mecedonians or the Legions of Rome, they all marched through Israel.

And so it became common practice for the people of Israel to bury valuable things in secret places. Rather than leave their silver and gold to be plundered by marauding invaders, the people took to storing their treasures underground as protection against the uncertainties of war.

It was probably a treasure hidden in this way which the man in Jesus' story found. Jesus does not tell us how the man found the treasure, he simply did. He might have been working as a laborer in the field when he happened across it, or he might have been traveling by when a piece of the treasure, perhaps uncovered by erosion, happened to catch his eye. We don't know.

But, at any rate, after locating the treasure, Jesus tells us he found a way to buy the field so that he could make the treasure his.

Now, it might seem to us a little unethical that he would buy the field without making the owner aware of the treasure hidden in it. You might say that the contractor in my story should have gone to the historical society or a museum to share Lincoln’s writing, instead of trying to profit from it. I don’t know.

But Jesus’ point is not whether or not the man acted properly—in fact (and this is something I’ll talk about a bit more later) Jesus tells the story in a way that shows the man didn’t deserve the treasure, he just found it after all—but the point is that this is a treasure of enormous value.

This is a life-changing treasure. Not just a sack of coins, this is the kind of treasure that means you’ll never be required to work if you don’t want to; you’ll never wonder if you have enough money; you’ll never be in need again.

The parable of the pearl is similar. **Verses 45 and 46:**

Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

In the ancient world pearls were considered the costliest of gems. Wealthy people would often buy them as investments. Jewish literature speaks of fine pearls as being beyond price. The Ancient Egyptians actually worshipped them. When Jesus spoke earlier of casting pearls to swine He was contrasting the lowest of unclean animals with the most valuable jewel. Revelations 21:21 says that each of the gates in heaven are made from single pearls, the pearly gates.

The merchant in Jesus' story was a pearl expert. He bought and sold fine pearls. He dealt with them everyday. And now this single pearl, the most priceless he ever saw, stirred his heart so much that he was willing to give up everything he had to buy it.

Here again, the point is that this pearl has incredible value. Apparently, the current owners don’t quite realize its full potential, but the pearl expert does. They still want a steep price, but this man knows the pearl is worth it. That this pearl will never diminish in value.

Both of these fellows must have felt as though they had just stumbled upon a winning lottery ticket.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like that. It is a treasure of immeasurable worth. It is riches beyond what we can imagine. It encompasses Christ and all that he offers--eternal life and unending blessing. As it says in 1 Peter, it is a living hope of an inheritance which is undefiled, incorruptible, and unfading.

***Treasure Acquired***That leads us to our second point, what I’m calling **treasure acquired**. The second thing we see is that following Jesus does not come without cost.

**The key to these parables is** the decision of both men to sell all they had to obtain the treasure they had found.

The man was only able to buy the field after he had sold everything he had. He had to give up all of his possessions, things which previously helped to define who he was. The same was true of the merchant. They both sacrificed everything to gain their treasure.

And as I described it in the story of the contractor, there must have been some people who thought their actions were foolish. It appeared that they were giving up too much, parting with things that others considered more important, for something that a lot of people did not immediately recognize as having value.

There is a paradox here. Our mission statement talks about experiencing joy. It is our conviction that a life lived for Jesus is the best life possible. But to many people outside of the church, it appears that we are making sacrifices and giving up things that they consider incredibly important. This ranges from relatively small things: like giving up our Sunday mornings in order to attend weekly worship services; to relatively large things like giving up the selfish desire to put ourselves at the center of our lives in exchange for putting love of God and love of neighbor ahead of love of self.

That’s the paradox: the path to experiencing joy in Jesus often travels through suffering and sacrifice. So, what’s up with that?

This is what Jesus’ stories are getting at: it’s the confidence that the treasure and the pearl will be worth it which makes any sacrifice endured while acquiring it worth it. If following Jesus means de-valuing some of the things the world says is important, if following Jesus means surrendering control of our lives, if following Jesus means thinking more of others than we do of ourselves, it is worth it because of the treasure we receive.

Pastor Tim McConnell, in a book called *Happy Church*, puts it like this. He says that “Then alters now.” He writes:

Because of the *then*, we live differently in the *now*…What we believe about the future changes everything about our present. What we believe will happen in the end changes the whole game…Christian happiness is sometimes a delayed happiness. We recognize that as long as we are in this world, there will be suffering. But even so, we are happy because we know for certain Christ will set things right. God will bring victory. It is already begun. (p. 114, 121-122)

The apostle Paul puts it like this, in **Romans 8:18:**

**18**I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

Jesus is a treasure that is worth whatever exchange we make in order to acquire it. Following Jesus may involve sacrifice in the eyes of the world—it may look foolish to those on the outside—but for those who know Him it is no sacrifice at all. In the words of Jim Eliot, one of the 5 missionaries who lost their lives bringing the good news of Jesus to the Auca tribe of the Amazon rainforest: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

***Treasure Enjoyed***The third point, then, is what I am calling **treasure enjoyed**. We have to see that Jesus is worth it! There is cost associated with following Jesus—there is sacrifice—but He is so, so worth it!

**Notice that neither of the men** in Jesus' stories showed a moment’s hesitation in making the trade off. All that they had for the treasure. For the merchant, it was the culmination of a lifetime of searching, certainly a joyous occasion. For the man with the field, as we’ve already seen, Jesus makes explicit mention of his joy.

For them, there was no sacrifice at all. Selling all they had was not difficult nor a drudgery. What they gained was of much more value than anything they might have parted with. They were able to rejoice over their new-found riches, they did not have time to mourn the junk they had sold. Letting everything else go was a joyous price to pay for such magnificent treasures.

When you know the pay-off is going to be huge, you don’t mind making sacrifices. The man in my story at the beginning would gladly have gone through all that he did because he knew that once he had that house, he’d have all he could ever desire. Maybe his friends thought he was nuts, but he knew it was worth it.

And that’s how it is with Jesus. Maybe the rest of the world doesn’t understand why you would give up your Sundays to be in church. Maybe they don’t get why you would sacrifice to volunteer to serve in Vacation Bible School or in Middle School Youth group or holding babies in our nursery. Maybe they don’t get why you would give up a week of vacation to go on a mission trip or why you would regularly make a financial donation to a child in a third world country through Compassion International or World Vision.

Maybe they don’t see why you would love the people in your church, or bring a meal to somebody when they are sick, or offer to pray for a coworker who’s having a bad week. Maybe they don’t see why you would do that—but for those who see the incredible value of Christ they know it is no sacrifice at all. Those who see the riches of His kingdom know that the exchange—all that I am for all that He offers—is always a good deal.

Real joy is found when Jesus is your treasure.

Jesus is worth it! Whatever sacrifices you are making to follow Jesus—whatever choices you are making to miss out on what the world chases after, whatever money you are giving or time you are putting in for the building of His kingdom—it is worth it! It is always worth it.

***Getting Serious about Joy***And so, **back to our mission statement**, we see that a sort of argument is being made. We are here to bring joy to Jesus. We are here to make him the first and most valuable treasure in our lives. We are here to sacrifice whatever we must in order to know Christ and the power of His resurrection (cf. Phil. 3:10). And when we do, we believe that we will experience joy in Him. We believe we have a treasure beyond compare. We believe we will be living the best life we could possibly live.

I believe the implication of this is that **we must get serious about joy**. As a church, we must be exuberant and effusive in our expressions of joy and happiness in Jesus. We must not shy away from celebration or laughter or song. When we see people experiencing the joy of Jesus in our church we must call attention to it and make room for it. We should never apologize for gladness. We should never stifle joy.

**C.S. Lewis once said**: “Joy is the serious business of heaven.” Tim McConnell writes:

Happy is serious business. I believe we need to learn the serious business of happiness in our Christian life together in the church. We need to learn to fight for joy in our churches. (p. 19)

He then goes on to point out that in America, and really in the Western world, “joy” and “church” are not often associated. Too many people in our culture associate church with bad experiences: dark and musty buildings filled with frowning people; institutional rules and unexplained rituals; an attachment to the way things were with little interest in engaging a changing world. As McConnell says: “Church has ben starved of its happiness.” (p. 19)

At Hope Church, we want to experience and express joy. We don’t want to be starved for happiness, we want to feast on joy.

Another **C.S. Lewis quote**: “It is a Christian duty, as you know, for everyone to be as happy as he can.” He’s not talking about a pretend happiness. He’s not talking about a plastic mask that you put on whenever you come to church where you smile and make like everything is going great even when it’s not. Lewis doesn’t want you to fake happiness. Neither does the Bible.

But he is talking about embracing the treasure that we have in Jesus. He is talking about remembering and rejoicing in all that Jesus has done for us.

Disneyland used to describe itself as the happiest place on earth. I believe that we should challenge that description. They’ve got a giant mouse, some roller coasters, and a bunch of grown women cosplaying in princess dresses.

What have we got? We have Jesus. We have been called out darkness into everlasting light. We are the people for whom the wrath of God has become the love of God. We have God’s Word to guide us into all truth, and we have God’s mission of love to give our lives meaning and purpose. We have God’s family to walk through life with us, to encourage us and challenge us and share life’s burdens with us. We have songs of praise and joy to sing and new truths about God to discover. We have the promise of heaven and eternal life and the confidence of knowing that in the end, good will triumph over evil and all will be made right around the throne of God.

**Psalm 144:15** says:

**15**Happy the people to whom such blessings fall!
    Happy the people whose God is the Lord! (RSV)

That’s us, that’s the church. We have found the treasure in the field. We have been given the pearl of great price. And so we should be people who live in joy!