

“Surprised by Joy”
The Fourth in a Series on the Parables of Matthew 13
Matthew 13:44
A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
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It was right after 9/11. October 7, 2001, to be exact. If you remember, that was the day that the US began bombing Afghanistan in response to the terrorist attacks that had left all Americans in a state of shock and disbelief.

On the morning of October 7, a Sunday, Patricia and I dressed for church as usual. Patricia was the minister of Orangethorpe Christian Church in Fullerton, California, and I was teaching at Chapman University and served as the adult Sunday School teacher at Orangethorpe Christian Church. The day was warm and balmy, the Santa Ana Winds having subsided for the weekend. I can’t remember what the Sunday School lesson was that day—but I do remember there was a full class. After 9/11, church attendance nationwide swelled for a few months.

Just before the worship service, a young man pulled Patricia and me aside with a look of panic on his face. We thought the worst, of course—another terrorist attack? His name was David, and he motioned for us to follow him to one of the church’s side doors. There, sitting just inside of the door was an unmarked box. Was it a bomb? Everyone was still a little jittery.

But then, we saw the box lid move—and then it moved again. Patricia jumped back. “What it is, David?” she asked.

“Rev. Patricia, it’s a box of kittens. Somebody left it on our doorstep. I brought it in, but I can’t keep those kittens in the box. They want out! What do we do?”

Patricia approached the box and opened the lid—kittens of all colors popped their tiny heads out and meowed and several began climbing the sides of the box, trying to escape. We noticed a lot of ants inside the box, too, and knew we had to do something. All we could think of were these tiny little lives in front of us that needed rescue. Our mission for the day became: Save the kittens!

Patricia spoke to the nursery worker. Since there were no babies that day, she turned the nursery into a kitten nursery. During the service, she attended carefully to her meowing charges—eight kittens in all. Another member who lived nearby dashed home and brought back some cat food, as the kittens were ferociously hungry.

After the service, the fellowship time—which was usually coffee and cookies and conversation—turned into an adopt-a-kitten campaign. Kittens—calico, black, brown, gray—were adopted by various cat lovers in the congregation. All but two, that is.

After the fellowship time when everyone had gone home but us, Patricia and I looked inside the box and saw there were two tiny snow-white kittens looking up at us, meowing impatiently. Nobody had wanted the white kittens for fear they might be deaf, as some white cats suffer congenital deafness. We already had two grown cats at home. We had no room for two more cats, but we took them home nevertheless, thinking we would find homes for them on Monday. But something happened on the way home. We fell in love with the kittens, and before we drove into our driveway, the kittens were already named—Matisse and Monet, because they looked like little works of art. Neither of them turned out to be deaf, but it wouldn't have mattered if they had. They brought us so much joy!

We had been shaken by unthinkable acts of terror on September 11, but on October 7, we were surprised by joy: snow-white kittens on the doorstep of Orangethorpe Christian Church. We quickly came to understand this joyous unexpected happening to be an act of divine grace, signifying to us that there is more, much more to life than terror and grief and war. There is love and beauty; gentleness and playfulness and goodness; and yes, there is joy!

Today's scripture lesson is about this very idea—being surprised by joy. We are in the midst of a five-week study of five of the parables in Matthew 13. The fourth and fifth parables we will examine today and next Sunday—The Parable of the Treasure Hidden in the Field, and The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value—are yoked together by a common theme, in a similar manner as the second and third parables were linked by a common theme. But as we saw with The Parable of the Mustard Seed and The Parable of the Leaven, each parable has its own distinctive emphasis as well.

The Parable of the Treasure Hidden in the Field seems quite clear—albeit a bit troubling—on first reading. An agricultural worker is going about his daily work, plowing a field, when suddenly he unearths an incredible treasure! Surprised by joy, he reburies his discovery and immediately goes to buy the field. The field costs him everything he owns, but so great is his joy at the incredible treasure, he counts the cost as nothing.

Now, before we get to the spiritual message of the parable, let's address the historical background—and the ethical question modern readers raise concerning the man reburying the treasure and not telling the field's owner about the surprising discovery. In ancient times in a politically unstable country like Israel, where there were no banks in the modern sense, it was a common practice to bury valuables in the ground for safe keeping, especially if it seemed that an invading army was approaching or if there had been a local *coup d'état* or some other instability. Of course, some of the owners did not survive the crisis and reclaim their treasures, so they remained buried. To this day in the Holy Lands, Jewish and Arab farmers and construction workers are keenly aware of the possibility of finding all sorts of buried treasures as they go about their daily activities.¹

Thus, the parable is an accurate depiction of daily life in ancient Galilee, and I should add that the statement about the finder reburying the treasure and not telling the field's owner

is also an accurate depiction of daily life in ancient Galilee. Please note that Jesus was not endorsing the man's behavior; Jesus was simply telling a realistic parable that captured his hearers' attention by its vivid depiction of daily life in ancient Galilee. The parable has the ring of authenticity.

The general spiritual teaching of the parable seems clear: discovering the kingdom of God—that is, experiencing God's redemptive activity in your life—is the most valuable experience you can have in life. It is worth more than everything else you possess. It totally rearranges your priorities in life.

But if you have been following my last three sermons carefully, you are chomping at the bits to ask the question, "So where is the strangeness in the parable? Where is the "twist" where we come to realize "we're not in Kansas any longer"? Excellent! You've learned the key to unlocking the spiritual message of the parables of Jesus.

Some well-meaning teachers say that the point of the parable is that you must be willing to sacrifice everything you possess in order to experience God's kingdom. I see how they get that idea—the man who discovered the buried treasure had to sell everything he owned in order to purchase the field. And, that line of thinking does seem to be the way of the world, right? You must give up something—for example, your labor or money—in order to gain something of value. "There's no such thing as a free lunch," they say. "That's just the way of the world."

But I suggest that you re-read the parable more closely. Sacrifice is not the point of the parable. The point of the parable is being surprised by joy at the discovery. The man's priorities in life were dramatically reordered, but he certainly did not count that reordering as a sacrifice. No way. He was joyful! Or more accurately, he was absolutely overjoyed! Wow, the kingdom of God must really be a phenomenal treasure to evoke such joy.

My point in asking you to read the parable carefully is this: nowhere in the Gospels did Jesus teach that you experience the redemptive activity of God in your life only after you have sacrificed everything; that line of thinking reeks of legalism. No, no, no! The spirituality Jesus taught is characterized by grace—grace through and through. You first experience the redemptive activity of God in your life, and then—either gradually, as in the preceding two parables, or suddenly, as in today's and next Sunday's parables—your priorities in life are completely and joyfully reordered so that you begin to experience life more and more abundantly. A life that is transformed day-by-day, from one grace to the next grace. A joyful life that God intends for us.

British author and lay theologian C. S. Lewis—who wrote such best-sellers as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and *Mere Christianity*—also wrote an autobiography entitled *Surprised by Joy*, after a Wordsworth poem of the same title. In that book, he described his search for the treasure he named "joy," and how he was surprised by where his journey took him: from atheism to theism, and then from theism to Christianity. He believed that joy is like

a “signpost” when one is lost in the woods. Joy points you in the right direction. His own spirituality and his many books were inspired by joy. And in an interesting twist, not long after his autobiography was published, when he was in his 60s, Lewis, a lifelong bachelor, met and married the love of his life—and her first name just happened to be Joy!

Ours is not a religion of grim-faced sacrifice at the expense of joy, but rather a spirituality that celebrates grace in everyday life—and celebrates this grace with unfettered joy, like the joy of children. We need to open ourselves to being surprised by fresh treasures of joy—whether it be helping hungry, snow-white kittens on a day when war breaks out, or reading a book that changes your life, or spending time with grandchildren, or joining a cause for social justice or some other service that helps others. Joy is the signpost that we are moving in the right direction. For the Kingdom of God—God’s redemptive activity in the world—has the delightful side effect of producing profound joy. This week, dare to be surprised by joy!

For that’s today’s good news. Amen.

¹ *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*. (Web.)