

Isaiah 55:10-13

Psalms 65: 9-13

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Sermon for July 12, 2020

THE PARABLE OF THE GOLD MINER

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Summary: Life is not just one damn thing after another.

Many years ago I found myself wandering with a sort of vague purpose through the mountainous back woods that rose up above a little town in eastern Oregon with the picturesque although somewhat harsh name of Granite.

To say it was a small town didn't really do it justice. While thinking about this sermon message, I looked it up online and learned that as of 2017 it had 24 people, and that gibes pretty much with my memory of it. The article I read online also gave the name of the two business establishments in Granite: one was a lodge, and the other was a place called The Outback, which according to the article sold food, fuel and supplies.

Although I would never have remembered the name of the place, that must have been where I stopped for gas that day many years ago. It was early in the morning, and along with gas I went inside and had breakfast sitting at the counter. For some strange reason, I even remember that it was biscuits and gravy, and that it wasn't very good. Anyway, it was during the casual conversations surrounding that breakfast that I learned that Granite had once been an energetic gold mining community during the first half of the twentieth century. I also learned that the gold mines up in the surrounding hills had all been shut down during the Second World War and then largely abandoned; but I also learned that there were a couple of old miners who still lived up there in the hills, now thirty or so years later.

Something about that story intrigued me, and since I was just bumming around at the time, I decided I'd spend the day driving my pickup on the old mountain trails that spread through the mountains above Granite. The trails soon proved to be too rough for my truck, so I left it and continued on foot.

These old roads wandered around the hills with no particular logic, but I was too young and careless to worry about not finding my way back, so I just walked here and there for several hours.

As I meandered around, I did indeed come across some old sites that had clearly once been used for mining, but which had obviously long since been abandoned. But finally as I was approaching one of these sites, I saw what looked to be a small, rough cabin that gave evidence of having been maintained: the roof hadn't fallen in and there was glass in the window and a door in the doorway. And sure enough, as I was walking towards it, a grizzled old guy came out through the door. We said hello and I explained what I was doing there, and he asked me if I wanted a drink of water or cup of coffee. I said sure to the coffee, and he invited me inside.

The cabin was about as rough as you can imagine: a cot, a table, a couple of chairs, a wood stove and a basin for water. We sat at the small table, and he served me a cup of the worst coffee I've ever had, before or since. Afterwards, he took me out and showed me what was left of the placer mining operation that had once dug gold out of the nearby hill, and provided a living to a camp of gold miners with stars in their eyes and dreams of striking the motherload.

The rest of those miners had moved on to other lives as the mines were shut down by the war effort, but something about this particular fellow had kept him there during all the intervening years and decades, living alone, in these most primitive conditions.

Although the placer operation with its sluicing troughs wasn't operational, he still went out every day and panned for gold. He showed me a little glass jar about half filled with grains of gold, and he said once it was full, he'd take the gold down to Granite and exchange it for supplies, and that was how he maintained himself.

I don't remember his name or what all we talked about during that long afternoon. I know he didn't tell me his life story or anything along those lines. As I recall we just chatted about this and that, the weather, hunting and fishing, just ordinary conversation. It was as if for him there was absolutely

nothing at all remarkable about his unusual life he had chosen for himself, and nothing to explain.

Late in the afternoon, he gave me directions for getting back to town, and on the way I found my truck, and our two very different lives continued on in their separate courses.

Over the years, as I've had occasion to remember that man all alone in his little cabin, one thing I've noticed is how my own thoughts about him have changed and evolved.

At the time, when I was so young and full of dreams of being a kind of mountain man poet myself, I remember admiring him for his rugged individualism and self-sufficiency, for his dogged determination in following his own star, regardless of what the world thought.

Years after that, when the foundations of the world I had built for myself were crumbling around me, I remember looking back at him with a kind of envy, perhaps even jealousy. Here was a man who had, in a sense, isolated himself from disappointment by keeping his expectations to a bare minimum. Being self-sufficient, he had protected himself from the possibility of impoverishment; being alone, he had protected himself from being disappointed by friends and lovers.

And years after that, during a period of hyper critical cynicism, I thought of him largely as a possible metaphor or type, as an example of how you could spend your days hoping and waiting for that one great discovery or achievement or stroke of good fortune that would transform your life into something much better, only to wake up at some point to find that you've missed out on all the rewards you might have had, if you hadn't been so fixated on that one impossible dream.

And now that I myself am older than that man must have been, and writing a sermon, I find myself wondering whether he might be like the man in another parable Jesus told, and which we find later on in that same chapter of Matthew:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (13:44)

Might my lonely gold miner have been someone who, while working his field, happened to discover the one activity and way of life for which he was perfectly suited and was perfectly suited for him? And was he perhaps granted the great grace of recognizing that treasure for what it was, and selling everything else he had, or might ever have, in order to retain it?

Who knows which if any of these various ways of thinking is true? I only met the man once, and then only for an afternoon.

But my point is that these various reflections I've entertained over the many decades were really more reflective of the reality of my life than the reality of his.

And when we read the great parable of the sower, or indeed any of the parables Jesus offered, I think that's important to keep in mind. Jesus never simply made up stories to make a point. The stories he told were always true, and always pointed to something in the world that he wanted his audience to see, and to think about.

In our translation, the parable begins *Behold, a sower went out to sow*, but that's a bad translation. The original actually reads *Behold, the sower went out to sow*. The simplest way to read that is Jesus, standing in his little boat, pointing over the heads of the crowd gathered to hear him at a farmer up on one the sloping hillsides behind them.

"Look at the sower," he tells them. *"See how when he sows, some of the seed lands on the hard path around the field. And in that field, there will be limestone near the surface, there will be areas full of thorn seeds, and there will be some areas of good soil. See how he casts his seed everywhere"*

In our reading for today, Jesus goes on to explain the imagery in the parable, talking about the birds representing the devil and the thorns the concerns of this life and so on. But that gloss is almost certainly something the author of Matthew added on his own, doing for Jesus something Jesus himself never did: explain his parables.

And why didn't Jesus ever explain his parables? Because they weren't just stories manufactured to make a point or illustrate a truth or provide something easier to remember than a simple statement of fact.

But then, what are they? My own suggestion is that they are true stories, reports of events and people Jesus himself knew or at least of whom he knew,

and of whom his audience might be expected to know. There really was a farmer who found a treasure buried on a piece of land which he then purchased; there really was a pearl merchant who invested his life savings in a single pearl; there really was a rich old man who had a son who squandered his inheritance and later returned penniless and ashamed to be welcomed back into the family; and yes, there really was a farmer come out to sow seed on a hillside that day Jesus was speaking from a boat.

What Jesus was doing was sharing with his audience certain events, certain slices of his reality, that for him had been resonant with meaning, that had seemed to exist as the shadows cast by heaven into his world, that had led him to engage with God and God's ways, and in so doing, to maintain and nourish his own relationship with God.

Jesus did not come to teach us facts, sometimes hiding those facts in stories. He came to share the life of man with God with us, to manifest man searching through God's creation for those special moments and places and people that have personal meaning, because God, in his infinite love has filled each of our lives with those things, if we only open our eyes to them.

Life is not haphazard, not just accidental, not just, as one bitter old sage had it, not just one damn thing after another. Don't you know that the hairs of your head are all numbered?

My old gold miner was not put there for my benefit on a single afternoon; nor was this long haired scruffy young and careless fool put there for his. But our separate lives, under God's gentle providence, intersected that one afternoon long ago, and provided, at least for the young fool, a lifetime's worth of nourishment and interest and perhaps even influence, in ways more subtle than the fool will ever know. Were I to share the story of that afternoon, as I have just done, I think it would be appropriate to refer to it as a parable.

And so our sermon prayer for this morning, O gracious God, is that you open our eyes to the richness of our own lives, that you help us find meaning in the people we know, the things we've done, in the situation around us, even in the sufferings and sorrows we've experienced. Strengthen us in the conviction that we are always and forever cradled in the everlasting arms of your loving concern, and that you have given each of us a destiny that is mingled with your own, and with that of your son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.