

## *Buried Treasure*

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May 18 2013  
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Isaiah 49:8-18

The LORD says to his people,

“When the time comes to save you, I will show you favor  
and answer your cries for help.

I will guard and protect you  
and through you make a covenant with all peoples.

I will let you settle once again  
in your land that is now laid waste.

<sup>9</sup> I will say to the prisoners, ‘Go free!’  
and to those who are in darkness,  
‘Come out to the light!’

They will be like sheep that graze on the hills;  
<sup>10</sup> they will never be hungry or thirsty.

Sun and desert heat will not hurt them,  
for they will be led by one who loves them.  
He will lead them to springs of water.

<sup>11</sup> “I will make a highway across the mountains  
and prepare a road for my people to travel.

<sup>12</sup> My people will come from far away,  
from the north and the west,  
and from Aswan in the south.”

<sup>13</sup> Sing, heavens! Shout for joy, earth!  
Let the mountains burst into song!

The LORD will comfort his people;  
he will have pity on his suffering people.

<sup>14</sup> But the people of Jerusalem said,

“The LORD has abandoned us!  
He has forgotten us.”

<sup>15</sup> So the LORD answers,

“Can a woman forget her own baby  
and not love the child she bore?

Even if a mother should forget her child,  
I will never forget you.  
<sup>16</sup> Jerusalem, I can never forget you!  
I have written your name on the palms of my hands.

<sup>17</sup> “Those who will rebuild you are coming soon,  
and those who destroyed you will leave.  
<sup>18</sup> Look around and see what is happening!  
Your people are assembling—they are coming home!  
As surely as I am the living God,  
you will be proud of your people,  
as proud as a bride is of her jewels.

Matthew 13:44--46

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

<sup>45</sup> “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; <sup>46</sup> on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

## I.

A long time ago, the rabbi Jesus told some stories to his disciples, in order to illustrate what the new reality, the new humanity, the new blessing was that was breaking out among them. Jesus was trying to point to a new thing happening, on earth and among us mortals, here and now. And one of the things he compared that new thing to was the discovery of buried treasure.

It is with great joy that I come to be with you today, May 18, 2014, brothers and sisters in the Emmanuel-Friedens Church! I am feeling, to borrow a word from a colleague in ministry some of you know well, “tickled” to be here. In fact I am feeling like that fabled entrepreneur of long ago, who found that buried treasure in some old field, and, burying it again, decided to bet everything he had on it, selling off all his worldly possessions in order to buy the field.

There is hidden treasure in this building, in this city, and among you the people of this congregation. Sometimes we may have trouble seeing it or sensing its nearness—that is what makes it buried treasure. And yet the word from the Spirit that has been on my heart is this simple conviction: I believe I’m sent to you here so we can find the spot, so we can dig it up together. It may take a little while, we may have to dig here and there—we may even sometimes disagree on what that treasure looks like—we don’t all see treasure the same way. But I have come to be with you so that we can do some digging together.

I know there is in fact precious stuff here among you. I’ve found it already; Lynn and I have sold our house, left a lively congregation, bet the farm if you will—on this new adventure.

## II.

So a moment of honesty is in order here. Treasure can be pretty well hidden, and not every one sees this treasure in this location! Not everyone sees the beauty or the hope or the promise here. I've been learning the stories of Schenectady and this area afresh, after my five years away from upstate New York. However I've known you from afar since I began my ordained ministry in another then GE town, Pittsfield Massachusetts, just a bit to the east of here. I know you have been through a lot. I'm told that that this city has lost almost half its population to out-migration caused in large measure by economic hardship. And despite the fact that there is some kind of recovery underway, things just ain't the same. Many probably have memories of days that look like a golden age now.

Moving to town, one has a strange series of random interactions. I went to Lowe's hardware the other day to buy a big tarp for our aging canoe. The woman at the checkout counter somehow got wind of my being a newcomer. She obviously had some issues with where she grew up! She used language to describe the neighborhood she was brought up in that I can't bring myself to repeat in a large group—you can ask me after church—but you've heard it yourselves in many forms. It was clear to me she had suffered a traumatic loss. "I won't even drive through there now" she said.

While I feel her sorrow and her fear, I want to say to you today what I was too slow or too polite to say to my sister at the checkout counter. I commit to you publicly that there is no neighborhood in this town or any surrounding community you may live in that as your new pastor I will not drive through, walk through or visit in—day or night. Because there is treasure here, there are good people, there is love, there is a passion for justice, there is faith here, some of it surprisingly deep, in the places you may least expect. And no one should be written off, no community abandoned, no neighborhood or congregation dismissed because it is different, or poorer or has experienced violence. I say this from personal experience.

As many of you know your new pastor spent most of 17 years living and working in urban neighborhoods and with a wide variety of church members and friends and neighbors from throughout the metro area in Rochester New York. For those of you who may not be aware, the neighborhoods of Rochester and its suburbs cover the same great spectrum of wealth and poverty, privilege and suffering that you know here in Schenectady county and the Capital district as a whole. And what I discovered there—or rather learned in my bones—was that some of the world's finest folk live in the world's toughest neighborhoods. I also discovered that some of the toughest customers live in the world's finest neighborhoods, along with plenty of great people who live right next door in equally comfortable circumstances. You and I and the world need to get over our stereotypes. Honestly, that's a daily discipline and a lifelong journey.

## III.

I've just moved into a neighborhood a few blocks from this church, the Stockade, a neighborhood that was destroyed in a massacre and fire in the late 1600s, and then rebuilt a scant decade and a half later.

Much longer in the past, hundreds of years before the time of Jesus, a prophet spoke to a people in exile, and to the remnant of that people still in Jerusalem, folk who had also seen their beloved city destroyed. The prophet, whose name we do not know, whose writings are recorded in the book of Isaiah, told the people not to lose heart. A day would come soon when the exiles would return and rebuild the city they loved, the city of God. God would be with them.

<sup>14</sup> *But the people of Jerusalem said,*

*“GOD has abandoned us!  
GOD has forgotten us.”*

<sup>15</sup> *So GOD answers,*

*“Can a woman forget her own baby  
and not love the child she bore?  
Even if a mother should forget her child,  
I will never forget you.*

<sup>16</sup> *Jerusalem, I can never forget you!  
I have written your name on the palms of my hands.*

The day is at hand to re-evaluate; rebuild; recover: to take up the tasks of restoration. Like the city of Jerusalem of old, this city—and this congregation within it—have a proud legacy and heritage. This church has great spiritual DNA: you bring the strengths of two congregations and many histories together in this church. This community is a wonderful ecumenical witness—two congregations that decided that they had so much more in common than their differences, and that they needed to join together in common life, common ministry, common witness. Over the course of coming together you have forged strong friendships and bonds, and worked diligently to live into the prayer of Jesus in John’s gospel: “That they all may be one”.

In recent memory you have taken a stand for, and then lived into, the welcome of all without regard to sexual orientation. Before that, you were leaders locally in the cause of civil rights and racial justice; you have stood in solidarity with women in the right to access adequate healthcare and be custodians of their own bodies; you have started significant ministries with the least advantaged and most vulnerable in your community; you have reached out to children and youth; you know what it means to be a church for all people. You are a metropolitan congregation with a local mandate to respond to your neighbors. In other words you are a pearl of a church, Emmanuel-Friedens: treasure not to be underestimated on the basis of size or apparent non-shininess.

And now it is time to enter once more in the tasks of rebuilding a city and a wider community and renewing, opening, strengthening a church community. Of course we are mistaken if we think that restoration and rebuilding means re-creating the city or the churches as we were in the hazy past. Even if we wanted it cannot be: neither God nor the cosmos works that way. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus pointed out, *No one walks through the same river twice*. I’m reminded of that daily as I stumble out my door to visit the banks of the Mohawk and walk along its edge. I’ve not seen the same river twice. In the barely two weeks I’ve lived near it

I've seen it quiet I have seen it rained on, I've seen it lower than the rocks with muddy footprints where someone has walked out. And yesterday, yesterday no one was stepping into the Mohawk, a swift running silent force of swollen water, barely contained between its banks. No one steps in the same river twice, and our calling today is not the same as yesterday or tomorrow.

#### IV.

You and I have a common calling for today! It is ours, with the help of God, to dig for the hidden treasure in this congregation and this city; ours to build and rebuild for God's new future on the basis of the faithful actions and convictions of those who have come before us, and our own actions of the past. However the treasure that is buried among us is no single achievement, no proud hymn, no tradition from the past. It isn't even ours, really.

We cannot do it like yesterday because it ain't the same river today. And yet we are not alone, we are not here by accident, we have a calling. God is with us, has written your name, and yours and yours, in the palm of a loving hand.

We who follow Jesus confess, we are looking for a living treasure, a tiny mustard seed, one bit of yeast that makes the whole jar of flour rise, a pearl of subversive wisdom, and yes, a river. Call it a promise, call it grace! Call it the kingdom of heaven, the New Jerusalem. There is a river of Love: a powerful swollen river of love, flowing deceptively quiet, running incredibly deep, possessed of a power not calculated as people calculate clout or influence. This holy love-river is going to help us dig: it is capable of tearing up the old assumptions, bringing life to dead hope, washing away the sins of the past, seeping into the foundations of our most precious guarded prejudices, exposing what is best in us, uprooting injustice, bringing a new kind of peace.

I'm so glad to be with you at last, sisters and brothers in Christ. May God be our source and stay. May Christ be our inspiration and guide. May the living Spirit be our hope and bond and the wind that moves us, in the days we have together. Amen.