

HIDDEN TREASURE

[Jesus said],] “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.

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

Matthew 13: 44-46

There is a famous scene, early in the first volume of the sprawling novel *In Search of Lost Time*, by Marcel Proust. The narrator, also called Marcel, is having tea, and he takes a madeleine, a kind of pastry, and dips it into his tea. And something about the taste of that cookie in the warm tea suddenly unlocks memories of his childhood in Combray and visits to his aunt. This involuntary memory in turn opens a floodgate of other memories and more characters, all of which will become the material of this seven-volume novel.

And then the narrator ponders the mystery of how the taste of this madeleine—which he had seen so many times in pastry shop windows that he hardly noticed them anymore—how the taste of this little morsel evokes memories and experiences and realities of his world that had lain dormant for years. It is like stumbling on a treasure in a field that had always been there, just waiting to be discovered. A treasure hidden in plain sight.

The two little morsels we read this morning come from a section in Matthew’s gospel called the parables discourse. It’s not the only place where parables appear in Matthew, but a collection that showcases this mode of Jesus’s discourse and teaching style. They range from fully developed stories, like the sower and the seed that we read last week, to these one-sentence, cryptic metaphors, whose meanings have to be teased out a bit more. The characters are not developed; we don’t know anything about the happy discoverer of hidden treasure and very little about the merchant, other than he has been on the lookout for a valuable pearl. And we know that both of them sold everything they had for the sake of the treasure they found. But the two parables are about more than transactions, about buying and selling—they are also about valuing. They are about recognizing what we see as a treasure, recognizing the value of what we see.

For the merchant in the second parable, the treasure was already a known commodity—a pearl. The only task is to keep an eye out for it, or maybe to go out on a treasure hunt for it. But it was different for the person in the first parable. The text doesn’t specify what the treasure is that the person discovered, only that it was stumbled on by a happy accident. It makes you wonder how many times they walked right by that treasure without seeing it. Or how many times they saw it—hidden in plain sight—before finally recognizing it for what it is, a treasure of such worth and value you will give up everything for it. The kind of value that God places on us and on everyone born. The kind of value that moved Christ to give his life for us and for everyone born.

I was thinking about these parables, and about valuable treasures that are hidden in plain sight, when I stumbled on a documentary on Netflix, called “High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America.” It is based on the work of Dr. Jessica Harris, a culinary historian who explores culture through the history of foods and cuisines, particularly

the foodways of Africans who were forcibly brought to America, what she labels the African diaspora.

I started watching the series because I am interested in food and food history—how foods carry meaning and significance far beyond their immediate experience and connect us to our history and culture, our family and community. But as I got into the series, I discovered an even more valuable treasure.

The writers and host and the talented Black chefs that make up the conversations and food experiences in this series reveal how much of the foods and cuisines that have come to define and shape American culture have roots in the Black experience. It begins with the experience of taking food products that are undesired or left over after those in power took the best cuts of meat, the best produce, and transforming them, elevating them into cuisine that not only nourishes the body, but feeds the soul. In fact, it is sometimes called “Soul Food.”

But even more revealing was how much of what we now consider mainstream American cuisine, from the elegant and refined to the most basic staples of home kitchens, also originated in the Black experience. There is a moving segment that dwells on the life and career of James Hemings, who arrived at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson’s estate, as an enslaved 9-year old. A personal attendant to Jefferson, young James showed such skill in the kitchen that when he was a young man Jefferson brought him along to Paris where he learned the art of French cooking. When they returned to Monticello he became quite famous as a chef, even though he was never granted his freedom.

In the documentary, the host travels to Monticello and meets another culinary historian, Dr. Leni Sorenson, along with one of the descendants of the Hemings family. They gather in the reconstructed 18th-century kitchen, and together they follow the recipe of one of James Hemings’ most popular dishes—macaroni and cheese. That’s right—mac and cheese, this quintessentially American staple of home cooking, comes from the Black tradition. Preparing even this simple, basic food as it might have been prepared in that 18th-century kitchen, talking about the history behind the dish and the experience of James Hemings, and then sharing it with those whose ancestors were also enslaved Blacks, is a surprisingly powerful moment.

The series is honest and forthright about the hardship and suffering and injustices endured by enslaved people. But it also celebrates the discovery of these treasures of joy even in the hardscrabble field of the Black experience. It is about not only recognizing the lasting value of these foods but even more about honoring the value of those who produced and created and perfected the foods that are still a large part of our common heritage and culture, those whose stories have been hiding in plain sight for centuries.

The significance of this series transcends the subject. The history of food in America becomes a lens through which we view the larger picture of Black experience and culture. It helps to re-frame our national story and acknowledge how much of the Black experience has been foundational to the American culture. It also acknowledges how much the resilience and dignity and contribution of many of our Black ancestors remain hidden treasures. But when those treasures are discovered and recognized and valued, they have the power to re-visit and re-tell our national story in ways that promise a healing and reconciliation that has eluded us for much of our history.

These two parables, especially the first one, invite us to be more aware of the ways God has been—and continues to be—at work in our world. It invites us to a keener awareness of how the purposes of God are sometimes like treasures hidden in plain sight. Sometimes those

treasures are discovered in the larger world around us, but sometimes they are so close to home they stare us right in the face.

During one of our recent Wednesday evening conversations, I had another bit of discovery. So often we look at our churches and all we see are declining numbers and aging members. And we see that as a liability, a problem to be solved. But what if we are missing a hidden treasure? What if this so-called liability is actually an asset—a treasure of wisdom and experience and close relationships just waiting to be discovered. Or rather, just waiting to be recognized for the value it has always held.

The Matthew 25 Invitation that we have been talking about for a few weeks now, reminds us that participation in the community of Christ doesn't happen just here in a secluded sanctuary on a Sunday morning. It begs us to go out on a treasure hunt and to be prepared to be surprised by what we find and where we find it. It asks us to see the value of things that have been hidden from our eyes, even though they are right in front of our face. And then it invites us to commit everything we have for the sake of that treasure. And finally, it invites us to re-invest that treasure right back into the world, to hide it in plain sight.

May it be so.

Paul Collier
First Presbyterian Church
Mason City, Iowa

3 October 2021