

Scripture: Matthew 13:44-46

Message: What if you discovered something valuable...?

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What if you discovered something valuable? What would you do? You stumble across a \$100 bill on the sidewalk. You find jewellery in a cookie jar purchased at a thrift store. You pick up a diamond necklace that washed up on the bank of the St. Lawrence.

What if you discovered something valuable? What would you do?

Maybe it's not something of financial value. What if you discovered true friendship? Or unconditional love? What if you discovered something as valuable as safety? Or peace? Or hope? Or comfort? What would you do?

Sometimes we stumble across an experience or a relationship that expresses something so valuable. Sometimes we search for it, looking in all different places. What do we do when we realize that what we have found has such amazing value? What price are we willing to put on it? What difference will that discovery make on us?

At the beginning of this new year, I am daring to suggest that we as a church need to be prepared to give up much of what we might have held dear in order to boldly live the values and truth of the kingdom of God in our current context. That's a bold statement. It's our next step of action; we've been talking about our church life-cycle and next steps as a church. From talking we take the step of moving from managing our programs to leading into a new direction. It follows a quote from a book I have been reading lately:

"Management asks the question of whether we are *doing things right*, while leadership asks the question of whether we are *doing right things*. Doing things right is comforting because it is a known and familiar path, even if it doesn't lead to a viable future. Being asked if we are doing right things is, by contrast, deeply disturbing. Because now we must stop to figure out, again, who we are, what our purpose is, and how we will live out that purpose in the context that has changed around us."

For many years churches have spent time and energy to define a vision and mission statement and setting goals. We decided what were the right things and we did them. Plans were made for where the church would be in 3-5, or even 10 years, with all the steps needed to get there. Our church approved a document reflecting this, which has been hanging in the hallway since April 1998.

That process worked in the past. I would suggest, and others who study this more than I suggest, that we are currently living in a very different world. Changes are happening rapidly, whether in technology or standards in society or communication or the place of church/faith in society. For example, consider the impact of smart phone technology and the

use of apps on the way we communicate or receive information. Or many of you might remember the time when almost everyone went to church; it was the normal and expected thing to do. Not any more.

The ministry of the church, of Bethel Church, in this rapidly changing society will also be different. It's not that the message changes. The seed, the yeast, the treasure, the precious jewel continues to be the truth of the kingdom of God. But how we live out that kingdom presence is not something we can define with a 3-5 year plan.

We are living in a time where we don't know exactly what ministry will look like in the next 6 months. Let me give you an example: In the not so distant past, the best thing a church could have was email and a website. It was cutting edge and essential. Then along came Facebook. That became the way to advertise and communicate for the church. Recently, at our meeting of the Brockville Youth Collective, the leader asked how many people check websites or email. No hands went up. How many check Facebook? A couple hands went up. What about Instagram? A few more. How about Snapchat? Most hands went up.

We used to be able to put an ad in the newspaper and reach a community. Not any more. And it might be different in 6 months from now. These are simple examples of our changing world that are just a tiny part of the deeper impact which this reflects on how people think and act.

We might see this as a frightening time of walking into an unknown future. Or we can see this as an exciting time of following God's leading into an unknown future.

Consider the people in our two parables. When they discover the treasure or the pearl, what do they do? In their joy, they sell everything to obtain that treasure and pearl. Did they have a 3-5 year financial plan in place? They sell everything. Did they have some committee meetings and planning sessions to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the different options? They sell everything.

This treasure is more valuable than anything else they have. This is the kingdom of heaven, something more valuable than any ministry plan or structure or way of doing things than we might have.

What is the kingdom of heaven? It is God's active rule in this world and in our hearts and lives. It is knowing God as King over every part of life, Sunday through Saturday, 24 hours a day. It includes the assurance, in this life, that our sins are forgiven through Jesus who died for us. It includes the assurance of life forever with Jesus who rose from the dead and went to heaven. He will take us there, too, in body and soul, to live and rule with him forever.

The kingdom of heaven is God's rule in our lives so that we can be a blessing to others to the glory of God. It is the rule of God in our lives so that all is right and good. It is living that

rule of God in this world to make things right and good and just.

A person might find the treasure of the kingdom because of a thorough search, checking out different faith groups or religions, different techniques or authors, various expressions of spirituality. Or a person might find the treasure of the kingdom by stumbling on it, flipping through channels or watching random YouTube videos, and realize they discovered something impressive. Or it may be something a person takes hold of and only later realizes its value.

However you gain an understanding of the kingdom and your place in it, you realize that it brings inner peace and satisfaction. Nothing else is good enough or satisfying enough. This kingdom, says Jesus, is so valuable that when you obtain it you are willing to give up for it whatever could interfere with having it. It is more important, more valuable, than anything else.

Something so important and valuable becomes a priority in our lives. It becomes the purpose for which we live. We live to know God and serve God and honour God. We live that others may know God. We live and work and breathe so that others may know the wonderful joy of this relationship with God.

That becomes the purpose of our church. The purpose is not to have all the right programs run in the right way by the right people. Consider what Jesus is saying with the pictures he uses to describe the kingdom. In Matthew 13 Jesus talks about tiny seeds, invisible yeast, a hidden treasure. We might have chosen different illustrations for God's ruling presence; things like military might or laws of the land or court decisions or large, imposing church buildings or impressive organs or praise bands or multiple staff or well-worded mission statements or a list of programs or something more obvious and respectable. But Jesus speaks of seed, yeast, hidden treasure.

That gives us a clue to how the church lives out this kingdom reality. It's more about quiet acts of loving faithfulness than about headline-grabbing, bullhorn tactics. We cannot present the gospel of a suffering servant like Jesus by arrogantly wagging our fingers. We cannot give the world the good news of grace if we mostly position ourselves in judgment, declaring right and wrong. The kingdom of God represents the most powerful force the world has ever known. But we've got to let the kingdom grow and leaven in its own quiet, humble ways if people's hearts are really going to be changed.

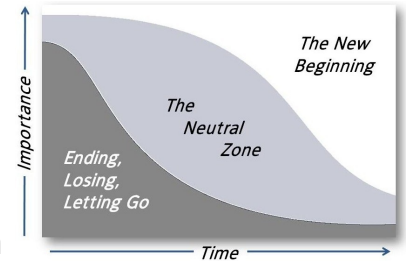
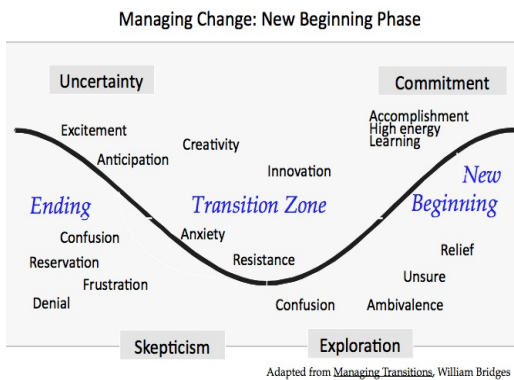
This past year I have been listening to stories which people from this church told about how they see God at work in Bethel. Embedded in those stories were values, which define who we are as a church. The most common values which came through the many stories were care, welcome, share, trust. In these ways the living rule of God is evidenced in our lives and in the life of this church. We cannot be and do everything to everybody. We are not the

whole kingdom; we are one church with these particular expressions.

Over the next few weeks we will look more closely at what can be involved in those values. The interesting thing, though, is that identifying these values does not give a clear definition to what we will do as a church, nor where we will be in 3-5 years.

That's the way we used to do things. We used to be told what to do and how to do it. Not any more. These values give direction to how we live out the surrender to God's rule in our life and in the life of our church.

I want to put a couple slides on the screen that I have shared with Council in the past year. It describes living in this time of transition. It is a time of ending, losing, letting go. As we discover that which is valuable, we let go of that which we have been comfortable with. We enter into a transition time, the neutral zone, moving to an unknown future and new beginning. It can be a time that is frightening and confusing. It can also be a time of creativity and innovation as we develop new ways of living out our faith. It leads us to a new beginning, a renewed energy and commitment to living the kingdom rule of God.



What are the 3 goals and 5 steps we need to take from A to B? I don't know. Council doesn't know. And there probably aren't any clear steps and goals. God knows and his Spirit will lead us.

That's our commitment and trust. This might not be comfortable for those who prefer structure and defined order. I know. Too bad. It's the world we live in.

And God is in charge.

What if you discovered something valuable?

There is the promise of joy in the discovery. There is the uncertainty of letting go of everything. There is the confidence of living out the rule of God. He is faithful. This is his church. We are his children.

To God be the glory.

Amen.