

9th Sunday after Pentecost (L17A) – July 26, 2026

Romans 8:26-39, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Pastor Chris Repp

Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

This is our third and final week in both Romans chapter 8 and Matthew chapter 13, and this, dear friends, is where the rubber hits the road, where the real payoff is for both of these important books of the Bible. Matthew 13 is thematically at the very center of Matthew's Gospel, and contains arguably Matthew's central point, the point to which everything before it leads, and from which everything that follows proceeds.

I will show how that works in a few minutes. But I want to start with Romans, as I have promised to do for these three weeks, and use it as our framework. Because Romans 8 wraps up the most fully-developed explanation of the gospel in all of Paul's writings, which began all the way back in chapters 1 and 2, where Paul laid out the mess that all of humankind is in, and from which only God can rescue us. That rescue happens, of course, by God coming among us as one of us in Jesus, living our life, dying our death, and opening for us a future where there wasn't one before. But Jesus' death and resurrection did not bring an end to history, nor did they bring the fulness of God's kingdom to the exclusion of the kingdoms of this world. For two thousand years now we have lived in the tension of what God has already done and what remains as yet unfinished. The kingdom of heaven has indeed come near, but the kingdoms of this world are also still here. Sin and death have lost their ultimate claim on us, but both remain lingering realities in our lives.

As we have seen in the past two weeks, it is precisely into the messiness of this in-between time that the Holy Spirit comes to our aid. First the Spirit reminds us who we are and whose we are. We who are baptized have been baptized into Christ's death and have died to sin. But we are also baptized into his resurrection, which means that we are being raised with him to new life as God's children, to a way of living that rejects sin and all the ways of this world that rebel against God and draw us from God, as we say in our baptismal rite. Second, the Spirit connects us to the whole of God's creation, which is suffering with us the consequences of our sinfulness, groaning as if in labor, anticipating that new life fully born. That means that the entire cosmic order, and not only our human neighbors, becomes a focus for our response to God's love for us. Finally, in today's part of the chapter, we are assured of how deeply committed God remains to us, working in us through the Spirit what we are unable – and often unwilling – to do ourselves. The Spirit, Paul says, even prays for us when we find ourselves unable to pray, and responds for us to God's searching when we are at a loss. Don't forget how we got here, to chapter 8. It was by way of chapter 7, where Paul found himself at odds with his own convictions and hopes, unable to choose good over evil. Because of Jesus, God is so fully committed to us that God is unwilling to allow our weakness or even our rebellion to be the final word. Like an old fashioned EMT, God breathes God's own breath into us to bring us back to life. (Because, as I know you'll remember, breath and Spirit are the same word in the Bible's original languages.)

God's commitment to us is also the theme of the parables in our Gospel reading from Matthew, particularly the two right in the middle about the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price. That might not seem immediately obvious if you read those parables in the usual way, as being about us and the importance of our valuing God's kingdom above all else. But I think it makes more sense to read them as being first and foremost about God, and only secondarily about us. I think you'll agree that in the previous parables in this chapter that we heard last week and the week before, God is also the main actor, the one whose seed the sower sows, and whose wheat

gets planted in the field, even while God entrusts the planting to others. Likewise, in the parables on either side of what I'm calling the central parables of this chapter, the mustard seed's miraculous growth is God's work, as is the working of the yeast mixed into that huge amount of flour – three measures was enough to feed maybe 100 people. So, what if it's God who is the subject of those two central parables? What would it mean for God to be the one who finds the treasure in the field and sells everything in order to obtain it? What would it mean for God to be the pearl merchant who stumbles upon the most precious of all pearls and, again, sells everything in order to obtain it? (It helps to know, by the way, that in the ancient world, pearls were by far the most precious thing imaginable. So, the "pearl of great price" would be something like the Hope Diamond would be for us, or the Koh-i-Noor Diamond in the British crown jewels, if you know about that.) What kind of treasure would be so valuable to God, that God would make such a great sacrifice as in these two parables? What would God give even God's own son for? Now you're catching my drift, right? The treasure, of course, would be us! And God is willing to "buy the farm" for us in Jesus. Some of you more seasoned folks see what I just did there, but I think I probably need to explain it. "Buying the farm" is an old expression for dying that apparently originated in World War II. It's a happy accident that fills out the idea that God gives everything for us in Jesus. That is the simple takeaway for both of these central parables. Matthew is telling his readers right here in the middle of his Gospel the meaning of what is coming in the rest of the book – that Jesus' death and resurrection were done for us, because God loves and values us above all else and will do anything to win us over and make that relationship mutual.

One more thing, though, about the parable of the pearl. Our Adult Sunday school just finished studying the parables using the scholarship of the Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine. She makes an intriguing point about what happens to the pearl merchant if you take the story at face value. He sells all that he has – everything – to get that pearl. Now, you might think, "well, he's going to turn around and sell it at a profit. It's what merchants do." But the parable doesn't go there. It ends with him having absolutely nothing but the pearl of great price. His life has completely changed, and he is no longer a merchant if he holds onto that pearl. He is something else. A man with a pearl. Yes, it's outrageous and impractical. But that's the story. And if it's a story first and foremost about God, but also secondarily about us, then it means that the relationship between us and God is indeed life changing. Of course that's true for us if Jesus' death and resurrection save us from sin, death, and evil and bring about a new way of life. But it is also, remarkably, true about God. When God becomes human in Jesus, God changes. God becomes fully invested in us and our reality. Because Jesus didn't stop being human when he ascended to the Father. He's still human, while also still being God, and, we say (don't we?) "he will come again." We'll say it together in just a few minutes.

That little detour into Matthew 13 now makes the end of Romans 8 all the more powerful. It fleshes out, so to speak, the depth of God's commitment to us that is promised here. God in Jesus Christ is with us and for us through whatever befalls us in this life, and there is nothing that can change that. Nothing. Absolutely nothing in all creation will separate you from God's love in Jesus Christ, no matter who you are or where you've been on life's journey, and no matter what is yet to come, for good or for ill. You are God's treasure. And as you get used to that idea, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit at work in you, you will also begin to see the treasure God sees in those around you and in the rest of God's good creation. And as your heart is opened and your life transformed by that promise, you'll find yourself being an agent of God's love for your neighbor, and for the world around you. May it be so by God's grace. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.