Book 17 SUNDAY, JULY 26, 1987

"I'VE FOUND IT"

Matthew 13:44-52

In his book, "Modern Man in Search of a Soul," the psychiatrist, Dr. Carl Jung, had this to say about the many people that came to him for help, "About a third of my cases are suffering from no clinically defineable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of their lives, this can be described as the general neurosis of our time."

I am sure that Carl Jung was correct in his assessment of people not only in his time, but in our time as well. Our souls are hungry for meaning. We ask the "meaning" question in numerous ways . . . We wonder, is there anything more to life than simply being alive--eating, sleeping, working, struggling to make ends meet? Our lives go on day after day. They may be successful or unsuccessful, full of pleasure or full of worry, but do they mean anything? Are we no different from insects and animals, except that we are cursed with the ability to ask, what does life mean? And as far as we know, other creatures don't have that problem.

Do you think the cow grazing contentedly in the field ever asks itself or asks another cow--"What is the meaning of life? Is our purpose only to eat, sleep, have milk taken from us and then die?"

I read the other day about an insect, a particular kind of moth with no mouth, a species of caterpillar that lays its eggs and then changes into a moth that has no digestive system, no way of taking in food, so that it starves to death within a few hours. Nature has designed this moth to reproduce, to lay eggs and pass on the life of the species. Once it has done that, it has no reason to go on living, so it is programmed to die. Are we like that? Do we live only to produce children, to perpetuate the human race? And having done that, is it our destiny to disappear and make room for the next generation? Or is there a purpose to our existence beyond simply existing? Does our being alive matter? Would our disappearance leave the world poorer, or simply less crowded? Will your life have added something of value to this world?

These are hard questions to answer and we can put off considering them for a while

when we are young and distracted with educational, career and marriage decisions. But sooner or later, we will come face to face with the questions--What am I supposed to do with my life? How shall I live so that my life will mean something more than a brief flash of biological existence soon to disappear forever?

There's a mystery to our existence in the first place. Dr. Lewis Thomas has written in one of his essays--"Statistically, the probability of any one of being here in the first place is so small that you'd think the mere fact of existing would keep us all in a contended dazzlement of surprise. We are alive against the stupendous odds of genetics, infinitely outnumbered by all the alternates who might, except for luck, be in our places."

"Even more astounding is our statistical improbability in physical terms. The normal, predictable state of matter throughout the universe is randomness, a relaxed sort of equilibrium, with atoms and their particles scattered around in an amorphous muddle. We, in brilliant contrast, are completely organized structures, squirming with information at every covalent bond."

There is both mystery and meaning to our existence, and finding the meaning is frequently the problem.

Alfred Nobel, a Swedish Chemist, made a fortune by inventing more powerful explosives and licensing the formula to governments to make weapons. One day, Nobel's brother died, and one newspaper by accident printed an obituary notice for Alfred instead. It identified him as the inventor of dynamite and the man who made a fortune by enabling armies to achieve new levels of mass destruction. Nobel had the unique opportunity to read his own obituary in his lifetime and to see what he would be remembered for. He was shocked to think that this was what his life would add up to, to be remembered as a merchant of death and destruction. He took his fortune and used it to establish the awards for accomplishments in various fields which would benefit humanity, and it is for that, not for his explosives, that he is most remembered for today. When Nobel was most successful, he was working against life and against friendship. Then he realized what he would leave behind if that were all he did and he gave the last part of his life another direction.

I remember a man who came to see me some

years ago--someone I had never met before. He telephoned and said he had to talk with someone about a problem. His story as I remember it went something like this.

"Several weeks ago," he said, "I went to a funeral for a man of my own age. I didn't know him all that well, but we worked for the same company and had children about the same age. He died suddenly over the weekend. A group of us from work went to his funeral and we were all thinking the same thing--it could've been me. They have already replaced him at the office and I hear his wife is moving out of state to live with her parents. Two weeks ago he was working fifty feet away from me, and now it's as if he never existed. I've hardly slept at all since then. I can't stop thinking that it could happen to me, that one day it will happen to me, and a few days later I will be forgotten as if I have never lived. Shouldn't a person's life be more than that?"

The need for meaning. It's a part of all of us. It's one of our deepest needs. Life is empty without it.

Surely this need is what Jesus was talking about in the two parables read earlier from

the Gospel of Matthew. He said, "The realm of God is like a treasure hidden in a field which someone found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

Here is an individual who one day stumbled onto meaning for his life, and immediately recognized the value.

The second parable is about a merchant in search of fine pearls who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

In both cases, Jesus said, the realm of God is like that. To find God, or the realm of God, or the Kingdom of God, or whatever other term one might use to describe God, is to find the ultimate meaning in life. We have discovered that which has the greatest value.

But how does one do that? How does one find God or God's realm?

Sometimes we find God right in the middle of our everyday life but don't recognize the treasure at first. I recall a man of middle age who said to me once, "I've done nothing with my life. When I was young I

honestly thought I would one day be Governor of my home state. I've not come close. It's terrible to find how ordinary I am." Yet this man had raised a family, been a productive member of a profession, achieved leadership in his community, and all in all had contributed more to the world than he had taken from it. He had walked right over the treasure in the field and not recognized it for what it was.

Another time when I was with a family making preparations for the funeral of an elderly woman, and one of her daughters said to me, "I suppose she never did all that much, but we sure loved her and she sure loved us." I smiled, and suggested, "That sounds like a pretty good epitaph to me." I believe that she found the treasure hidden in the field.

There are many times in our lives when the treasure of God is right there before us, and yet hidden from us, because we are looking for something too spectacular. It is the Good News of Jesus Christ that the Kingdom of God is found among us in the ordinary things of life. And when we recognize that, we also will find new meaning for our living.

I do not care what your vocation is, how you spend your time, what your satisfactions or disappointments are--the Biblical truth is this: God is near at hand in the commonplace, and in the ordinary and in the task at hand.

Rabbis Kushner, in his latest book puts it this way--"What is life about? It is not about writing great books, amassing great wealth, achieving great power. It is about loving and being loved. It is about enjoying your food and sitting in the sun rather than rushing through lunch and hurrying back to the office. It is about savoring the beauty of moments that don't last, the sunsets, the leaves turning color, the rare moments of human communication. It is about savoring them rather than missing out on them because we are so busy and they will not hold until we get around to them."

And the further truth is this, according to Jesus, you will find the hidden treasure or the pearl of great value--you will find the realm and the love of God as you go about serving others. It is when we are connected to others in acts of love that we are most connected to God--a simple truth that we frequently forget. You will find the deepest meaning in life as you work with

others to make this world better.

Too often we seem to think that there is one big answer, one ultimate solution to all of our problems, rather there are many, many little answers. So it is that the Kingdom of God, God's activity, God's power, God's love is like a treasure hidden in a field. It is not to be found in the pomp and glory of the world, but in humble, quiet places and wherever justice is being done, where the hungry are fed, where people simply love each other and take care of each other.

Some people like the individual in the first parable kind of stumble onto this truth like finding a treasure hidden in a field--they weren't searching for a treasure but found it anyway. Others of us are more like the merchant in search of the pearl of great value--we spend a lot of our time looking for God, looking for meaning in life and go down many dead-end roads, and only later in life do we find the pearl of great value, and more likely than not, we find it not in some far off place, but right near home. We have to be wise enough to recognize the treasure and not rush headlong past it in search of something more important.

A minister once asked a prominent member of his congregation, "Whenever I see you, you're always in a hurry. Tell me, where are you running all the time?" The man answered, "I'm running after success, I'm running after fulfillment, I'm running after the reward for all my hard work." The minister responded, "That's a good answer if you assume that all those blessings are somewhere ahead of you, trying to elude you and if you run fast enough, you may catch up with them. But isn't it possible that those blessings are behind you, that they are looking for you, and the more you run, the harder you make it for them to find you?"

My friends, it is the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that you can find the treasure hidden in a field right here. You can find the pearl of great value right here. God's love is present among us here and now, and that love of God will go with you as you leave this place. That love is the treasure of highest value--it is the pearl of great value. It is what gives meaning to your life and mine. AMEN.