A recurring fantasy of my childhood was the search for buried treasure. I enjoyed imagining myself on tropical islands contending with pirates and wild creatures of the jungle. I don’t think I was the only child who actually drew a treasure map that I imagined would lead me to the discovery of a chest full of rubies and pearls and gold coins. Sometimes child’s play mirrors the deepest truths of adult life. What if were to allow ourselves for just a moment the childhood fantasy of creating a treasure map for our world? Would that treasure map send us off to extraordinary exotic places or would it rather lead us to dig more deeply into the here and now of our ordinary lives? In our Gospel text Jesus the master storyteller said the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which a man found and covered up; and 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 who on finding one pearl of great value went and sold all that he had and bought it. Jesus tells stories of two individuals, one a farmer who if the truth be told is not looking for anything at all but stumbles upon the treasure by plain old dumb luck. The other is a merchant, who is also routinely going about his business and may be equally surprised to find the incomparable pearl. Jesus lifted up the response of one who in the midst of everyday life encounters something of great worth and does everything within their power to acquire that treasure. This morning I would like to engage you around questions arising from these parables: Where does the person of faith, the “treasure seeker” start looking for this treasure? How will we know this treasure when we have found it? And what must the treasure seeker do to acquire the treasure?

Have any of you read the best-selling book, Ship of Gold in the Deep Blue Sea by Gary Kinder? It is a remarkable tale of a steamship, the USS Central America that in 1857 was carrying millions upon millions of dollars of gold from California when it went down in the Atlantic Ocean during a terrible hurricane. The book tells the story of one unlikely treasure seeker by the name of Tommy Thompson, a renegade scientist who wanted to do what had never been done before. Thompson wanted to recover a ship in the deepest ocean a feat that was considered from a scientific point of view to be technically impossible. After a search of several years, Thompson was able finally to locate the CA and with it stacks of gold bullion and piles of gold coins strewn across acres of ocean floor. This discovery of the treasure of the CA would make him and his investors rich beyond their wildest dreams. For Tommy Thompson the recovery of the gold of the Central America was certainly an enticing goal. But the more you read this book you realized that finding the gold was really not his ultimate purpose. For Thompson the true treasure was the value he placed in advancing marine archeology in ways that would unveil for the first time the ocean depths. For Tommy Thompson the treasure was the possibility of recovering something from history. The treasure was found in building a team of scientists and seamen who knew just about everything there was to know about underwater operations in the deep sea. Going after the gold of the Central America was like plowing the field, according to Thompson. The treasure was found along the way of seeking for it in all kinds of side benefits and discoveries that came about. How do we define the value of that treasure? Is it the thing itself, the going rate on the gold exchange? Is it the value of something that was lost and found? Or is the value also measured by the labor extended, the risks involved? Maybe it is the courage and skill and the energy of the treasure seeker. How do we define the greatest treasure for which we seek?
Where does the person of faith, the “treasure seeker” start looking for this hidden treasure? I am convinced that the parables of Jesus throughout Matthew 13 offer us a very significant clue about where to start looking for the great treasure because the location of the parables in every case is everyday life. From the parables of Jesus we know that there is something about the character of the kingdom that is hidden. It is after-all, the oldest trick in the book to hide something in plain sight. The treasure of the parable is located in the field of a farmer in the very furrow he is plowing. The precious treasure of the parable is located in the market place for the merchant who is routinely sorting through his wares. Jesus parables suggest that it is in the midst of life in its most ordinary garbs which surprisingly, unexpectedly yields up the most immeasurable treasure. Holiness and joy are hidden in the dullest of our days. Imagine yourself following the clues of such a treasure map, would you have the patience the willingness to go over old ground again and again, convinced that there is something there that you might have missed. Some clue that is waiting there for you. Where would the X spot be located in the map of your life and world? And when your shovel hit with a thud on the treasure chest and when you opened the chest, what would the treasure be?

How do we define our treasure? What is it that is most precious to you? So much of human history, of the history of this country has been driven by the dreams and ambitions of treasure seekers. From the Spanish conquistadors who came to this land seeking El Dorado the fabled city of gold, to the cry of Eureka of the California gold rush which provoked the first great westward migration gold has been synonymous with treasure. Today from Wall Street to Main Street, the American dream has become synonymous with the pursuit of wealth. Is that how we define treasure? Jesus said that wherever your treasure is, there shall your heart be also. Jesus defined the human heart as the place where we keep our greatest treasure. The human heart is the core of our deepest identity where we locate that which is most precious to us, that which is of ultimate value. Life’s insecurity, the transitoriness of life is symbolized in moth, rust and thief all those forces out of our control that can take our treasure from us. Jesus said, be careful that you do not let your heart become ultimately attached to that which not only can be taken from you but probably will. Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. In your heart of hearts let your treasure be that which no one can take from you – your faith in the God who loves you who gave life as a precious gift to you, who pours out countless blessings upon you in every single moment. One of my all time favorite movies is O Brother Where art Thou, a comedy that is set in Mississippi of the depression era. It is a story that mirrors Homer’s Odyssey as it tells the tale of three escaped convicts on a quest to find buried treasure illegally gained. If you saw the movie you probably remember that moment in a movie theater when one convict who has been recaptured played by John Turturro is with a chain gang watching a movie in a theater when he, notices his two brothers still fugitives a few rows behind him. And knowing that a trap has been set for them, he whispers do not seek the treasure. Do not seek the treasure. If you haven’t seen this great film, you must. Turns out that the true treasure all along for the leader of the gang played by George Clooney was not so much the money, but the possibility of being reunited with his estranged wife and children.

What is your greatest treasure? I spent some time this week thinking about what is truly precious to me, what I really value. But I want you to invite you to think about what that might be for you. What is your treasure? Think about how that has changed for you over time; over the span of your life’s journey. Perhaps what you once thought was precious now in hindsight you see was only fool’s gold. What I am asking you to do is look within with a compassionate and non-critical seeking to understand what you define as treasure. Where is your heart’s true desire? What is that pearl of great price? What is that deepest longing of your truest self? The story that comes to your mind may appear to have little
to do with faith or God. But perhaps the story of your treasure is the most important parable that we are dealing with this morning. Jesus the great story teller was trying to tell stories that spoke to people inside of their own experience. His parables lived where they lived. But the point finally is like the pearl merchant or a peasant farmer to go within your own experience and seek the treasure. That treasure whatever it might be could be a metaphor for the Kingdom of God. The parables of Jesus suggest that treasure is in the eyes of the beholder. May the one who has eyes to see may he, may she see. For the greatest risk in life is not to see, not to recognize what is of enduring value not recognizing the great treasure, of being deceived about the true value of something that is right before you. Very simply where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

My greatest treasure is in having a story that defines my life, this Gospel story of Good news, this story of God’s people a story that is partly told in the Bible and partly told by the lives of ordinary people of faith, plowing the field of ordinary life. My treasure is found in the story that is being written by this community of faith over a century and reaching into the future. My treasure is in the relationships that have been formed here over the last almost 4 years. My treasure is this community of faith and the remarkable acts of mission and ministry that have flowed from this community and place. Next week on stewardship dedication Sunday we have an opportunity to declare that we treasure; to proclaim what we value here in this community of faith. Yes, our congregational life may seem ordinary at times, like the farmer plowing a field that holds no surprises. The kind of plowing that can be dull and routine and is always hard work. And then we stumble upon a great treasure here in the midst of our ordinary life. Our eyes are opened and we realize that what we have here at EPC is far more precious than all the possessions we have. And when we commit our financial resources to this place, we are saying that where my heart is there will be my treasure. I will not allow my heart to settle for so little as money or possessions. I will not put my heart in things. I will invest my money where my heart is in this community of faith. Jesus said, do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth, nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also.

This brings us to the last question that we set out to consider this morning: what is it that you must do to secure that treasure once it is found? Like all the parables of Jesus these two are intended to unsettle, shock, invite and challenge. If we allow this parable to do its work in us, it may uncover our timidity, our hesitancy, our half-heartedness, our holding back and wanting to play it safe. This parable invites us to risk all for the Kingdom of God. This parable of Jesus speaks to us about the need in the life of faith to act decisively on that which is of ultimate value to you. The punch line of this little story is the need for decisive action in order to gain a precious treasure. A punch line that gets in your face and says: what would you do? What would you do to recover the treasure? What would buying the field mean for you? What would selling all your assets be for you? Perhaps useful to us, is to reflect on experiences in your life where you did not act decisively and perhaps lost that which was precious in your sight. But more useful to us would be your own stories of times when you have seen in your mind’s eye a true treasure for which you have done all you could to make it happen. May God bless all the treasure seekers who are willing to act decisively to secure that which the heart must value as the highest good.