

## **Sermon, Sunday January 27, 2019 – Leaside United Church**

When was the last time you have been looking for a treasure? When was the last time you found something precious and unexpected? Maybe you have found something you believed to have lost long time ago, maybe you have found something completely new to you. When did you find a treasure?

As we are thinking about Hidden Treasures today, let me tell you the story of somebody who found a treasure that changed her life.

We are not in icy Canada but in the Middle East, in the north of Israel at the Sea of Galilee. It is not snowy and icy, but hot and humid, yet a soft breeze is gently blowing.

Mariam was on her way to the Sea of Galilee. She wanted to buy fish from the fishermen to cook at night for her family. Her mother-in-law had offered her to look after her children, so she was free to walk quickly to the lake and buy what she needed. She loved her kids, but often she just needed some time for herself. She lived in a small clay house, together with her parents-in-law. She loved her family, but sometimes she just needed to breathe.

Mariam was on her way to the Sea of Galilee. She saw a big crowd there. Wondering, she came closer. Hopefully, there was no lack of fish. Often, when the fishermen couldn't catch enough and sold all their fish already in the morning, people complained, shouted and protested. No fish, no meal. The harvest had not been good this year. Mariam also had difficulties to feed her family every day.

But it didn't seem that there was a protest. A man was standing on a boat and talking to the crowd.

"Mariam!" Oh, her neighbor. "It's Jesus of Nazareth, he came to us! Have you heard of him?" Jesus of Nazareth? Yeah, she had heard of him. She had heard that he was traveling from village to village, preaching and healing people. There were many preachers like him. They traveled, they preached, they healed, they took food and money. Some preached the Law of Moses, some preached themselves.

"But his preaching is different.", they said. "He is preaching love, and he is loving people. He even heals the sick, the possessed, the blind and the lame." Mariam was skeptical. She was always surprised how many people paid

attention to preachers like this Jesus. For her, all of them were just frauds who wanted money. She even heard that sometimes they had healed the sick, and later it became worse with them. But Mariam also knew that people were desperate. Desperate for meaning in life, hope, food. The grounds were not very fertile, but to buy food in the cities was too expensive and the cities were too far away anyways. So people listened, and hoped life would change.

“Listen, Mariam, listen! He is amazing!” Her neighbor tugged at her sleeve. Reluctantly, Mariam stayed. “But only briefly”, she said, “I have to cook.”

*“The kingdom of heaven...”*, the man in the boat started... “The kingdom of heaven”. Oh yeah, Mariam thought, another story of the “kingdom of heaven”. Since centuries people were hoping for the kingdom of heaven to come. Centuries and centuries of apocalyptic hope. People were craving for the Messiah to come and to establish the kingdom of God on earth. God would finally reign over his chosen people, God himself, with his Messiah as his representative. No foreign people would conquer and humiliate the chosen people anymore. Throughout its history, ancient Israel had been ruled by foreign powers – the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greek, now the Romans. When the kingdom of heaven came down, God would finally defeat these powers – once and forever. Centuries over Centuries, preachers proclaimed that it couldn’t take a long time anymore. God had told them so, they had received prophecies... The kingdom of heaven is close, it’s so close you can almost touch it. People left the villages and cities and gathered around preachers in the desert to wait for the Messiah. These preachers promised their followers to be close to the Messiah if they stayed with them. And never happened anything. Yes, something often happened: The Romans put them into prison and killed them. Mariam often thought of Qohelet, Ecclesiastes, the wise Teacher who said: *What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.*

Mariam was really not interested in the kingdom of heaven. She didn’t believe in it, and she needed to feed her family. But wait. *“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.*

*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in the field...*

Actually, she knew what he was talking about. As so many different peoples and powers had conquered and ruled over Israel rich people often buried their coins or jewels in their fields. If soldiers or robbers came and searched their houses they wouldn't find them. When their owners suddenly died or were deported to become slaves or soldiers, the coins or jewels just stayed in the field. Mariam had heard of people finding treasures in that way.

*The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant...*

Pearls, merchants... She has never been to the cities where merchants offered their goods. But she has heard people coming from cities and telling about spices, fruits, jewels, clothes being sold there, and also pearls. Pearls were the most precious good you could imagine. One of her friends down the street had inherited one. She saw her pearl, it was really beautiful. Rich people would pay a lot of money to get a precious pearl.

Interesting, what this Jesus was saying. The kingdom of God is like a hidden treasure... But then, the kingdom of God is not an actual kingdom, it's not God and his Messiah ruling over the earth.

Who is this Jesus? "He is healing people.", they say. Many healed people in the past, and many heal people today. That's nothing new. But he is loving people. And he says that God is like a loving father and like a caring mother. People say that God's mercy is visible, tangible in Jesus. Some whisper that he might be Elijah, or John the Baptist, another preacher in the desert who was finally beheaded by the Romans. Some whisper he even might be the Messiah. Mariam has heard people talking about him, and about his words. God is like a father, like a mother. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the Exodus from Egypt and later from Babylon. The God priests are approaching with incense and sacrifices. This God is like a loving father, like a caring mother? Of course, she knew that God was merciful. The psalms said so, and also the stories of Abraham, the Law of Moses, the prophets. But this was history. God seemed distant to her. But a loving parent isn't distant. For the first time she felt a warmth in her heart when she thought about God. A merciful father, a loving mother. This Jesus showed a different image of God.

But what is the kingdom of heaven now? Mariam wondered. She liked the stories he told. She couldn't explain what the kingdom of heaven was. But she understood something in her heart. It's a treasure to find God's love. It's the

most precious treasure that you can ever find. God is merciful and loving, towards me, towards my family, towards my neighbor. Her whole heart was suddenly filled with love. Love for God, and love for the many people she saw around her, listening to Jesus, carrying fish in their arms, little children, baskets. Maybe the kingdom of God is love reigning in my heart, she thought. Love that is coming from God. God's love for me, and my love for God and for others. Maybe this love is so much stronger than any earthly kingdom, even if God and his Messiah are ruling over the earth. If you want to change the world, you need to change hearts. And the love of God is changing hearts. It's like a treasure hidden in the field...

"I need to buy my fish!", she suddenly thought. "I need to cook, my kids are hungry." She turned around and left the crowd. After a while she stopped and looked around. She still needed to feed her family, the grounds were still not fertile, the Romans were still ruling over Israel. But something had changed in her. Her heart was filled with love, she felt loved by God, and she felt love for her family and all the people she had just seen.

"I think, I really found a treasure. I can't wait to tell my family about it..."

When has been the last time that you have been looking for a treasure, and maybe even found one? Have you found that treasure hidden in the field? Go out and look for it, but be careful, it might change your life. Amen.