

God's Treasure Chest

A Message Offered by
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This sermon was offered upon the confirmation of seven special young people in our congregation.

May 1, 2011

Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

Exodus 19:3-6 NRSV

A while ago I stumbled upon a word that may have be as new to you today as it was to me back then. The word is *segullah*. It's a Hebrew word that refers to a private treasure or nest egg belonging exclusively to an ancient near-eastern monarch. Technically, by law or power, the monarch owned all the land in the kingdom. But you can't eat land in a crisis—or take it with you into exile if you are attached by your own people. The *segullah* functioned as the king's personal insurance against times of hardship, rebellion, or disaster. The *segullah* often consisted of items that were easily transported and hidden -- precious metals, stones, and rare objects. This word came up as I was studying the way David funded the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem. David contributed not just from the nation's royal wealth, but also from his private *segullah*, his personal treasure chest. I bet Prince William and his new bride have a *segullah* of some sort as well – or at least a set of their own personal dishes, just in case.

We're not kings and queens, but we do have *segullahs*, don't we? They are those little stashes of stocks and bonds or Beanie Babies that we hope will sustain us through a rainy day.

Did you know that God has a *segullah*, too? What do you think is in God's treasure chest? What do you think God values more than anything else? What do you think God would rather die for than live without?

Did you ever play that sharing game where you imagine that your house is on fire and you only have time to grab three things and you're supposed to tell the others what you would grab? If God played that game, what do you think God would save from the fire if he could? Maybe *that's* what's in God's treasure chest. It wouldn't be any created thing of course—God doesn't need gold or insurance records or photos. And I don't think God would risk his life to save abstract concepts like truth, goodness, or hope. God values these “things” very highly, even treasures them—but God doesn't *need* them any more than we need more of our own personality—God *is* truth, goodness, and hope—they'll never go away so long as God exists.

I'm sure you've figured out by now what's in God's *segullah*. It isn't much of a secret, but I think it's still surprising: *people* are what God treasures most. People like you and me are God's *segullah*, God's personal, private treasure.

God's people gained this special status when God chose Israel, of all nations, to be, in the words of today's lesson, his “treasured possession.” If we were reading that passage in Hebrew it would say, God's “*segullah*.” Just like a king picking out his personal property from all the state riches, God wanted Israel to know that “Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” Aren't these words stunning? Of all the things in creation that God could value and does value, God treasures *people* most—and our spiritual forebears—the people of Israel—most of all.

Knowledge of their special status quickly went to Israel's head. Moses tried to keep that from happening. On a later occasion Moses tried to explain to the people that God's choice had nothing to do with them personally. He told them that it wasn't because they were the biggest nation—they weren't. And it certainly wasn't because of their outstanding

purity and goodness—the Israelites sinned in ways that must have made the pagans blush. Moses told them that the only reason they were God’s *segullah*, his chosen, was because God had chosen Abraham and made a promise to him years before. And why did God chose Abraham? Just because. [Deuteronomy 7:6-8; Gen 12:1]

By the time of the prophet Malachi—almost three thousand years after Abraham—Israel was beginning to think that being chosen wasn’t all that great. They wondered if keeping God’s commands was worth it: nice guys were finishing last and the mean girls seemed to be getting away with their games. Their kingdom had been destroyed several times; they had been forced into exile; drought and famine were regular occurrences. What was so wonderful about being God’s “treasure?” That’s when God reassured them that on the day of judgment they would see the difference in the fortunes of people who served God and those who didn’t. He would make it worth their while. [Malachi 3:13-18]

You may be thinking that learning a new word is nice and mildly interesting, but that all those passages describing God’s treasure are about *Israel*, not *us*. You would be right, if Christ had not come along. Now all who call Jesus their brother are sons and daughters of Abraham in the eyes of God. That’s why Peter can echo Moses and say about Jew and Gentile—about us—

you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people... Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.

1 Peter 2:9-10 NRSV

Peter said that now *we* are God’s *segullah*; he simply used Greek words to do it. If he’s right, everything that was true for Israel applies to the adopted family of Jesus Christ as well: like others who came before us, we are God’s “chosen” people.

As far as we know, Jesus never explicitly called his followers God’s *segullah*, but he did say ...

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.

Matthew 13:44

I always thought that in this parable we were supposed to see *ourselves* as that “someone,” that person who found the treasure—Matthew uses the Greek word for *segullah* here—and went and bought the field. That may be one meaning of the parable—that the kingdom of Heaven is so valuable that we should give everything for it.

But parables can have more than one meaning. What if the “someone” in the parable is God? And couldn’t the “treasure hidden in a field” be God’s followers, hidden among the masses of people on earth? And if so, could it be that Jesus was saying that God has found us like a poor woman finds a bag with a million dollars in it. And that God is so excited by this discovery that God has given everything—even his only Son—so that he might have us? I think Jesus was saying that *we* are that treasure that God has found and purchased with his own body and blood. [This reading of the parable comes from an online article by Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Parables of Atonement and Assurance: Mt 13:44-46.*]

If we are God’s special treasure, his crown jewels, his personal, private, and irreplaceable possession; if all these Bible passages really apply to us together, what do you think this means?

- Nothing is more important to God than having a relationship with us.
- We shouldn’t get too full of ourselves. That would be like a diamond getting all proud that it’s a diamond, as if it made itself. God didn’t choose us because we’re so special; we’re special because God chose us.
- None of us is God’s treasure alone. It’s not that *you* are God’s treasure or *I* am God’s treasure—we are God’s treasure *together*. Each one of us is like another ingredient in a recipe. We don’t taste so great on our own, but mix us all together and we taste all right.
- As God’s people we can look forward to the Day of Judgment with confidence and even hope. Consider a savings bond. When you first buy it, it’s not worth much, but give it enough time and it will be worth a

pretty penny on the day of redemption. On Judgment Day, there's going to be a lot of interest in us.

By saying that we're God's treasure—that along with Israel, we are God's chosen people—we're not claiming to be part of some exclusive club. [There *was* a time when this would have been the case. Before Christ, only Abraham's biological children could claim to be God's *segullah*.] Now, people of *all* races and nations can be certain that they are God's treasure the moment they accept Jesus as their Lord, Savior, and brother.

There are times in our life when we feel like we're not worth two cents. Maybe you're feeling rejected, damaged, ugly, dirty, worthless, broken, forgotten or used. We all do sometimes. And that feeling can become the way we see ourselves. But that's not the way God sees you. In his eyes you're golden, you're the pearl of great price, you're treasure hidden in a field.

God's never going to forget you. If I haven't forgotten about the baseball card collection that's buried deep in my parent's attic, God isn't going to forget *you*. And Jesus taught that where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. If we are God's treasure, then God's heart is with *us*—always. [Matthew 6:21]

Ever feel like you have to prove yourself? How unique and special you are? How successful or powerful or calm you are? Sure you do—sometimes at least. We all do. But it's so unnecessary. That's like a quarter trying to shine itself up to make it more valuable. Treasure doesn't have to prove itself to be loved; it just has to be itself. Let yourself feel God's love for you today.

Do you sometimes feel ashamed of your flaws and defects? If we see ourselves as God's treasure we won't be ashamed over these things any more than a \$100 bill would beat itself up because it's wrinkled. Our flaws may be something we want to work on, but they don't compromise our worth in God's eyes.

Picture the thing that you value most in this world. Maybe something you've obsessed about— a ring, a car, a child, your I-phone. Now imagine someone trying to take that thing away from you, steal it right from under you. What would you do to stop them? What would you do to protect that

thing? The way you feel about that thing or that person you treasure is a pale imitation of the way God feels about us. “It is time us to realize how precious and valuable we are as God’s people. [In the Bible] God is saying that his greatest pleasure, joy, and delight is found, not in the stars, or in any part of the cosmos that he created, but in the church—in you and me *together*.” [P.G. Mathew “Beware: You Are on Display—Part 2 2000, online sermon Grace Valley Christian Center.] A few moments ago we sang,

*Lord, you are more precious than silver.
 Lord, you are more costly than gold.
 Lord, you are more beautiful than diamonds,
 And nothing I desire compares to you.*

Part of calling Jesus Christ Lord and Savior is saying how much he means to us.

Another part of discipleship is discovering how deep is God’s love for us. Take that song and turn it around. Imagine God singing this song to you, his *segullah*, his special treasure:

*Laura and Hannah, you are more precious than silver.
 Misha and Miranda, you are more costly than gold.
 Laura and Sam, you are more beautiful than diamonds,
 And, Paige, nothing I desire compares to you.*

Friends, that’s the song God sings to you and me every day. May our lives reflect the great love that God has for all of us. Amen.

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