

FIRST THINGS FIRST

A sermon preached by the Rev. Terence L. Elsberry, Rector, at St. Matthew's Church, Bedford, New York, on the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23, October 11, 2009.

I

Two summers ago, two Swedish grandmothers who are also amateur geologists went poking around in the forest region of northern Sweden – and they found gold. They discovered gold – they discovered it and big time.

Siv Wiik (Veek), and her friend Harriet Svensson, tapped into what experts say may be one of the richest gold deposits in Europe.

These two ladies, lifelong friends, have been exploring every patch of field and forest clearing in this remote region of Sweden for 40 years. Mostly they've gone hunting for nature's bountiful food supply. Over the years they've picked for themselves and their families mushrooms and wild berries – blueberries, raspberries, blackberries and cloudberry. (I learned they even found a few elsberrys.)

But Mrs. Svensson and Mrs. Wiik have been, all through these years, berry-pickers and mushroom gatherers with a difference. They've been after more than food alone. They've been also looking all through the years for something of more lasting value, something even greater and more lasting than food. These two women through the years, these wives, mothers and now grandmothers, while living lives of busyness and often ceaseless activity, have had as the *subrosa* theme of their lives and friendship, the search for gold.

They've never left home for a stroll in forests or fields without their geologists' hammers and they're magnifying eyepieces dangling from ribbons around their necks.

And now – suddenly, unexpectedly, amazingly, gratifyingly – after 40 years of searching, in the summer of 2007 they found it! These two gentle ladies, looking all these years, hit pay dirt. They went for the gold. And they found it.

II

The young man in today's Gospel didn't want the new gold.

He didn't have to search for 40 years to find it. He was still young, and here he stood face to face with the Lord of the universe; here He stood before Jesus. And Jesus held out His hands filled with the gold of life's greatest joy and ultimate satisfaction. Here Jesus stood offering in Himself humankind's chief goal and ultimate objective. And the young man rejected it.

He rejected the gold.

He turned his back on ultimate satisfaction.

He turned his back on the best there is.

He turned his back on the reason for which he was created in the first place, the reason why you and I were created in the first place – which is to know God and walk with God – and he walked away because he couldn't give up his cars and his houses and his vacations and his fancy clothes and his memberships for God.

I have a somewhat different take on this passage than a lot of preachers. Here's how I'm different:

Many people take Jesus' follow-up words to His disciples about how hard it is for rich people to get into the kingdom as a diatribe against wealth.

I disagree. And I disagree not just because our community, relatively speaking, is fortunately fairly affluent.

No, it's not the possessing of wealth that's bad, it's being possessed by the wealth.

Possessions are not, of themselves, bad; being possessed by them is bad.

That's what keeps us from following God – being so possessed, so obsessed by things that we can't take them or leave them. Because if you and I are possessed by our money and by our possessions and not free to go where God would have us go because of that possession, then we are the losers. Because then we're not free to hear the Lord say, "Come. Follow Me."

The young man knew he'd lost that day. The story said he went away grieving. He was in a state of grief because he was enchanted by Jesus' teachings and drawn to follow this man who somehow made God come alive for him. But he felt he couldn't live without his possessions.

His possessions defined him. He drew some part of his identity from the things he'd accumulated.

I know about that. When I was a young man, I worked very hard accumulating possessions that would express to the world the man I wanted them to think I was. Those possessions, some of them things of beauty, some of them – in the case of some of the books I'd collected – things of depth and meaning.

But when Jesus made Himself real to me, when He called me to give up my attachment to lesser things and embrace the real article, I was able to do it.

Why? Because I'm some sort of a super-spiritual guy who has this extra gene of grace or something? No way. I'm a man like any other – no better, no worse than anyone else.

The reason I was able to let go of the possessions and follow the way the Lord laid out for me was not because of something special in me, but because of something special in Him!

He revealed Himself to me in such power, such overwhelming, life-transforming ways, that everything in life became secondary to knowing Him and His will for my life.

When I discovered gold, everything else turned to tin.

Somehow, for whatever reason, the young man in today's story wasn't able to receive the gold. I feel sorry for him. He felt sorry for himself. And well he might. He had a choice. Jesus gave him a test, and he failed it.

You and I are from time to time given the same kind of test. It happens in the choosing of our priorities. When we consider the priorities of our lives, where do we put God in the ranking?

III

Do we have so many other things and activities we turn our back on Him and simply walk in another direction?

Or do we, like the Swedish grandmothers, while searching for the mushrooms and berries of life, also remember to carry always with us our geologists' hammers and magnifying glasses, because no matter how busy and preoccupied we may be, we're still always looking for the gold?