

Big Bucks

Franz Felhaber has money problems. He's not broke; he's just been accused of money-laundering – literally.

Felhaber, a customs broker in El Paso, recently strolled into the Treasury Department in D. C. with a little over five million bucks in cash – dirty, waterlogged, almost unrecognizable cash. He heaved the bundles, looking more like shake shingle roofing than U. S. currency, onto the counter and said he'd like some nice clean money, or perhaps a cashier's check, in its place. This isn't the first time the businessman has attempted such exchanges, and his story varies with each transaction: He found the money under an uprooted tree; he happened on a suitcase buried in an alfalfa field.

The feds say finding money isn't a crime but importing it illegally is. They want to know a little more about Felhaber's windfall.

In first century Palestine this problem would not have arisen. In a territory long on conquest and short on banks, refugees often interred their life savings in clay jars then lit out for the territory. If the original owner died in flight or never returned home, the coins lay there until someone, say a hired hand driving a team of oxen, felt the ploughshare scrape against pottery and stopped to investigate.

Jesus invokes just this buried booty scenario in Matthew 13.44. In fact, the parable of the hidden treasure is itself a hidden parable: he leaves the madding crowds and whispers it to his disciples in private (Mt 13.36). It has all the intrigue of an Ian Fleming thriller, of passwords whispered behind one's hand and secret codes cracked by turning to the correct page of yesterday's New York Times. Jesus contrasts this Antique Road Show stroke of luck with a story about an entrepreneur, an expert jeweler whose quest for perfection finally pays off (Mt 13.45-46) but both stories come under the same cloak-and-dagger atmosphere.

The two stories have the same point: life in the kingdom of heaven, life where Christ's writ runs supreme, outstrips in value all the world has to offer. But of the two, I confess I prefer the first. I lack the savvy ever to make a killing on Wall Street. I'm really not cut out to become an overnight dot com dynamo. If I ever strike it rich it will be because I stub my toe on a ton of gold someone carelessly tossed out with the trash.

In the same way, I wish I could take at least a little credit for knowing Christ. I admire the testimonies of those who burned massive cranial candle-power searching and researching various truth-claims until the gospel emerged supreme. At the same time I rejoice that the Lord often arranges happy accidents for spiritual schleps like me, and that one day I will arrive at the judgment bar of God with a bag full of saving grace and say in all honesty, "I dunno, Father. I was slogging along through life and there it was."

Of course, in the end, whether we seek Christ or stumble upon him, we only find because we were first found, and only seek because we have been sought. The real question is whether we will today – in each moment's choices – crack the kingdom code that unveils the supreme value – and the supreme urgency – of redeeming the time to purchase Christ's reign.

X Marks the Spot,
Doug