

“The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Mt 13:44). In the difficult times that Jesus lived in, some people actually buried their valuables in the ground. Of course, Jesus later told a parable discouraging anyone from burying money in a field. The master was most upset and chastised the lazy servant for not putting the money in the bank so that it would draw interest.

What would it take for you to sell all you had and go buy a field with buried treasure in it? While you may have difficulty answering the question, we know that for God, the question had a definite answer. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:16-17). Each person is unique and unrepeatable. To God, every person is to be treasured and revered for being created in the image and likeness of God.

Jesus encourages us to look out for one another and to not let any earthly treasure get in the way of reaching out to help our brothers and sisters in need. Just after he tells the Parable of the Talents (Mt 25:14-30), Jesus speaks of the Judgment of the Nations (Mt 25:31-46). If someone is without food, we are to help feed the hungry. If someone is thirsty, we are to give them a drink. If they are a stranger, or naked, or ill or in prison, we are to care for them. Indeed, Jesus will judge us on our compassion in reaching out to help others in need.

Last Saturday, I stood by the graveside of Fr Chuck Petersen, SJ who was buried in a cemetery overlooking the airport in Bethel. He died last Christmas in California suffering from complications of the Corona Virus as he tended to the sick. As often happens in Alaska, burial in cities often takes place in the summer. His niece from Montana flew out to Bethel for the funeral and cherished all the memories she held of her late uncle. Once her uncle was buried and the grave was filled in, she knelt down over the hallowed ground and wept dearly. Everyone felt for her. She needed to cry and to mourn and no one wanted to take that from her.

I could not help but think back to the night before when at the end of the funeral Mass she invited others to share their memories of Fr Chuck. When the crying stopped, I looked for an opportunity to tell a story that would put a smile on her face. And then a second, and a third, and a fourth, and a fifth person, unburied a hidden memory and shared it. Each story told of the innate goodness of Fr Chuck and helped to counterbalance the tears she freely shed.

When she left Alaska, Fr Chuck’s niece knew her uncle far better from the many stories she heard. While she had lost an uncle, she had gained a new family, in the many people who reached out to her at the funeral. The niece found a hidden treasure in the people of Immaculate Conception parish and like the Parable of the Buried Treasure, she knew she must return again and again both to honor her uncle’s memory, but also to share in the joy she found in the compassionate people of Bethel.