

## Spiritual Fools' Gold

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I cut my teeth on western movies. Like Willie Nelson, "My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys": Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, Roger Staubach. And I have a thing for ghost towns—which has led to more than one "Wild Goose Chase"; but ask Jo Lynn about those. She enjoys telling those stories more than I.

One of my fondest memories is a Colorado vacation, and a jeep tour I took with my father-in-law and a family with two teen-aged boys. We followed narrow, steep roads into the high country where we visited old mining "ghost towns"; tramping around those dilapidated buildings, snooping around musty mine entrances. Imagination took me to another time, and I understood the allure of that setting.

We stopped for lunch along a pretty stream, and after we ate our guide gave us each a large pan and showed us how to "pan" for gold. Soon, I heard a squeal, and we crowded around the boys' mother. There in the sand and pebbles in the bottom of the pan, a tiny glimmer caught the high altitude sunlight, and I felt my pulse quicken. Soon there was another shout. This time a chunk the size of a pea nearly blinded us all. Now there was new intensity in our work, and we worked in silence.

After a few minutes, our guide told us that we were panning in "Fools' Creek", and what we were finding was Iron Pyrite—"Fool's Gold". He told of hundreds of prospectors, panning that same creek, hopes soaring with every sparkle; claims staked and fought over. "Right over there, three men died in a shoot-out over what amounted to less than a square yard of creek bank."

Then he said, "Follow me," and led us along a trail up a steep slope. We walked less than a hundred feet, and came to a clearing, where there were some rusty train rails, and a few rotted railroad ties. He told us a story: "In 1903, eight men on a railroad work crew were using dynamite to clear this road bed, and on this spot a small vein of gold was uncovered less than eighteen inches below the surface.

"The crew killed the foreman and a railroad official who'd come along for the ride that morning—reported they were killed accidentally by a dynamite blast. Then they secretly strip-mined this area, roughly one-fourth the size of a football field. In three weeks, they took eighteen million dollars in gold (1903 prices), and then, following a planned schedule, one at a time so as not to arouse suspicion, they each quit the railroad, and disappeared. The whole story was kept secret until 1969, when the last of those eight men broke silence in a Ft. Worth nursing home."

Then he said, "Look around. From here you can see "Fools' Creek" and the entrances to seven mines." And he pointed to and named each one. Not an ounce of gold or silver was taken from any of them. People gave blood, sweat and tears, and their lives; even took other lives, for what proved to be empty hope. And all along, within sight of it all, almost a quarter billion dollars in gold—today's prices—lay eighteen

inches beneath their feet."

And then he said, "Remember how you felt when you were panning the creek down there and saw the sparkle? Remember how you acted? For a few seconds you experienced what they felt; and I hope you have a better understanding of what really happened here in the 1870's."

What a metaphor of life. And what a wonderful entry into this morning's text. Setting up the text is the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000. And they chased after him like children chasing after a clown in a parade, scrambling for the candy he tosses on the street. They came running after him, and...

JOHN 6:26-35 (NRSV) *Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. <sup>27</sup>Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." <sup>28</sup>Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" <sup>29</sup>Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." <sup>30</sup>So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?" <sup>31</sup>Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" <sup>32</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. <sup>33</sup>For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." <sup>34</sup>They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." <sup>35</sup>Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*

I do hope you see the connection: "food that perishes;" "fools' Gold'. When you step back and look at these things from a distance, it's easy to see them. But there in the middle of it—down on your knees on the creek bank, and your eye catches a glimmer in the sand...

There is deep spiritual hunger in our world today. Deep calls to deep. It's almost desperation—the creature seeking to know the creator. A generation ago that hunger led seekers into Asian mysticism and Zen Meditation and all things metaphysical—all the way to witchcraft and the bizarre. The "The Exorcist" was a box-office smash. I was campus minister at Central Oklahoma University, and we held a "religious emphasis week". The guest speaker who by far attracted the most attention was a converted priest of Satan.

Today that same fascination focuses on the Walking Dead—the "Zombie Apocalypse."

In the decade of the 90's many thought that spiritual hunger could be satisfied by a new, contemporary form of worship. Mega-churches sprang up—churches called themselves, "Worship Centers," and their whole purpose was worship and praise. The walls of their sanctuaries were bursting. The top twenty fastest growing churches in the United States were centers for praise worship.

A Survey I saw on the internet a years weeks ago reported that since the decade of the 90's the turnover rate in those churches has been almost one-third per year. Congregants of those churches changed churches on the average every fourteen months! Fewer than 20% stayed longer than five years.

There is a hunger to know life that goes beyond flesh and blood; to know that life is more than that. And people had not found that hunger being satisfied by traditional church language and worship; but, it turns out, they weren't satisfying that hunger by the more contemporary, praise-oriented churches, either.

People are spiritually hungry. They want to be "fed", but they want to order from the menu—to choose what they believe will fill them spiritually—the definition of spirituality basically is whatever satisfies and makes them me good. And if they didn't find it on the menu here, they'll go somewhere else—about every fourteen months or so, searching again—seeking that "something" that would satisfy the deep spiritual hunger—that emptiness.

That was twenty years ago. Today, they essentially have stopped searching. They've given up on church and on organized religion. They're "spiritual but not religious." There is credible evidence that it is not coincidence that levels of stress and anxiety and substance abuse have risen significantly.

How do we find a spirituality that lasts for more than fourteen months—that's more than spiritual fools' gold? And how can we know when we find it?

I believe the problem is that people have been looking for "It," instead of looking to "Him." We discover lasting fulfillment when we turn to the one who set the standard for a satisfying spirituality. In the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, Jesus has gone to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, and has been asked to read the Scripture. After reading he says, "This is talking about me." Listen to that scripture. It's from Isaiah:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

If you're looking for a spirituality separated from life and ministry and service in the flesh, know this: it doesn't exist. There are those in every congregation who say, "We have to get spiritually renewed first; then, we'll serve others." But Jesus says life doesn't reach its deepest spiritual level until we serve others; until we deal directly with poverty, captivity, blindness and oppression.

Why is that spiritual? Because it relates us directly to the one who said elsewhere: "I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me a drink." There's no "fool's gold" in that pan!