

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**  
**September 25, 2022**  
**Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

Startle us, O God. Crack open our hearts and minds to what you would say to us this day. Shake us from complacency, challenge us to new understanding and insight to see beyond ourselves and to where you would lead us in new ways. In Jesus Christ, Amen.

[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

“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.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the

bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

After two weeks of lengthier parables, the story of the sower and the seeds, and the wheat and the weeds, we now get what one person calls the “grab bag of parables.” A quick succession of images to describe the kingdom of God. It’s as if someone in the crowd yells to Jesus, “tell us more. What is the kingdom of Heaven? How would you describe it?” And Jesus decides to give a whole bunch of examples hoping each will resonate with different people. “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, it’s like yeast, it’s a hidden treasure, it’s like a merchant searching for pearls, and it’s like a net full of all kinds of fish.”

It's a little overwhelming. We know Jesus loves to tell a good story.

“Once there was a man with two sons...”

“There was a man traveling from down from Jerusalem from Jericho when he was attacked...”

“There was a sower who scattered seeds...”

“The kingdom of heaven is like...”

Jesus can tell a good story, but I’m not so sure about this quick succession of stories. These stories seem ambiguous and maybe a little provocative. I love how after Jesus has told these stories he asks, “Have you understood all of this?” He has told the lengthier stories about the weeds and the wheat and the sower scattering the seeds, and he had to

explain what they meant in detail for the disciples to understand them. He then tells these five quick parables and asks, “Have you understood all of this?”

Past experience notwithstanding, Jesus asks, maybe with a sense of hope after a full day of teaching and giving multiple examples, “Have you understood all of this?” Hoping against hope, perhaps the disciples will get it this time. This is important stuff. This is life-altering eternal kingdom of heaven teaching. Jesus is trying to give them a glimpse of God’s ordering of the world, a taste of what abundant life for all people might look like. God’s plan for the world is different than what we might think.

Through these stories, Jesus teaches us a new way to look at things. And he does so by talking about ordinary, everyday things. But, again, Jesus has a way of turning things on their head. These parables are disruptive. I know the disciples say they understand these stories. They say “Yes” to Jesus’ question about if they understand all that has been taught to them through these parables. But I’m not so sure. Maybe. But I know as I looked at them this week, and as we talked about them during the Thursday bible study, it seemed there was a lot open for interpretation, and some provocative confusing parts of these stories. I don’t know that I could give such a quick “yes” to Jesus’ question.

The mustard seed is tiny, but mighty. I know that some of us have heard a sermon or two on how large things can have small beginnings. How even the littlest act can become something we don’t image. The smallest seed becoming a big tree where birds will find shelter and nest. But this seems to me to be another example of Jesus talking about a bad farmer. Mustard is a weed. And it can grow uncontrollably. It is invasive. If you have ever been in the south and see weeds growing everywhere, on power lines and trees and buildings. It’s kudzu. It grows everywhere.

Mustard is like that. For a farmer it would be undesirable. It might choke out the crops they have planted. And what's more here, in this story, this mustard seed turns into a huge tree. And not only that, but birds nest in the tree. They build a home and raise a family. Again, if you are a farmer, I think the last thing you would want would be a tree in the middle of your field with birds in it. Birds that might eat the seed you plant, or pluck at the grain you would rather harvest. In this story, the farmer has to give over a portion of the field for something that would ordinarily be unwanted.

The woman who hides the yeast in the flour—or leaven in it—is also disruptive.. If you were to use the flour without knowing there is leaven or yeast in it, well, the results wouldn't be good, particularly if you are attempting to make unleavened bread for your Passover meal. In Jesus' time, leaven was often meant to represent something impure. It contaminates the flour. For any of you that became sourdough bread bakers during the pandemic, think of the large jar of starter. A gross icky smelly mess that is alive, but when it is mixed and baked, if you know about it, it makes wonderful bread.

It's curious that Jesus mentions a specific amount of flour. He says that the woman hides the leaven in three measures of flour. Jesus' audience would likely recall this amount in another familiar story. Three measures of flour is a lot, think 40 to 50 pounds of flour. It would be a lot of bread. It is an image of extravagance and generosity. The last time a woman used three measures of flour to make bread was Sarah. When Abraham and Sarah are visited by three strangers. These three strangers who are actually messengers of God and come to tell Abraham and Sarah that they will have a child.

Abraham sees the strangers and says, “let me bring them a little bread,” and then asks Sarah to make bread from “three measures of choice flour”. Through this news, Abraham and Sarah will fulfill the covenant and their descendants will be blessed to be a blessing... This leaven is disruptive and a symbol of the divine.

And then there is the man who finds a treasure in the field and hides it and then goes to the owner of the field and buys the field. But isn't that dishonest? He knows the treasure is in the field, so he knows the field is worth more than what he buys it for. Sure, he at least buys the field, so he owns it outright, but it seems a little dubious at best.

And then there is the merchant who finds a pearl so valuable that he sells everything he has in order to obtain it. It seems ridiculous to us that someone would sell everything they have just for one pearl.

All of these stories are, well, a little disquieting. They are disruptive. As one writer says, maybe the kingdom of God is “threatening before it is comforting, because it invites no half measures.”<sup>i</sup> The good news of God makes claims on our whole life. It is invasive and creeps into the reality we have come to accept and “challenges the views we've lived by, and again and again calls into question assumptions that have guided much of our lives in the world.”

And that might be, for those of us who kind of like the way the world is, a little upsetting or nerve-racking. It is not always easy to challenge the status quo if the status quo works for us. If we are satisfied, if we are secure on our own, we don't really need the good news of God to come in and mess everything up. Except that we do. Because it isn't just about us.

For those that are dissatisfied. For those for whom the status quo means less than they need, or who keeping things the way they are means that they are still left at the margins, or left out altogether, well, this is good news. These parables get us to think about things in a new way. Get us to see things that we might not otherwise look for. They lift the weak and the vulnerable up, make us think twice about what we consider holy. Make us reconsider what or who we count as valuable. The kingdom of heaven gets in and messes with things.

And that's one of the remarkable things about these stories that Jesus tells as well. They are things that make us think about how we see things. About seeing things that others don't. Seeing value in something that maybe the world doesn't see. And when you can see that value, when you get a peek at that treasure, when you catch a glimpse of the kingdom – it can be so all encompassing that you will do whatever it takes to have more of it. Jesus, I think is telling us to work on how we see things. Making sure we see what is truly worthwhile, and then going after that with all of our might. Seeking it in such a way that we would change our entire lives to have more of it.

Maybe being a part of the kingdom of God, being a part of the faith community is about helping one another recognize the holy in the ordinary. Helping one another see the holy in the unexpected way or place. Maybe it is a reminder to find the good in the disruption. To see where God might be at work. Perhaps being part of the kingdom of God is being willing to invest in something that others may think is ludicrous. The kingdom of God might just make us act and speak differently. The kingdom of God might even show up in ways that are not just unexpected, but in ways that may not always be welcome.

These stories invite us to see God in the every-day and in the disruptive. To recognize that God is at work in our midst. It can lead us to ask questions about what we might expect to see when thinking about how God works in the world? Where we might see glimpses of God's kingdom? Or, for us to evaluate those times when our expectations have been overturned, and yet it opens something up to us that we hadn't ever considered before? What may we have to give over or give away to be closer to the kingdom? What is so valuable to us that we are willing to change our life? What might our lives, what might the world look like if we see things the way God sees them?

Amen

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, <https://www.davidlose.net/2017/07/pentecost-8-a-parabolic-promises/>