

Sermon Text – Sunday, July 26, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: 1 Kings 3:5-12; 2nd Reading: Romans 8:26-39
Scripture for message: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 “What’s it like?”

According to Amy-Jill Levine, an author and university professor who has a lot to say on the subject, “Jesus told parables because they serve as keys that can unlock the mysteries we face by helping us ask the right questions: how to live in community; how to determine what ultimately matters; how to live the life that God wants us to live.”¹ Jesus teaches with parables to confront and provoke his audience into deeper thought. Jesus uses parables to describe the kingdom of heaven. Parables confuse and challenge us but maybe his reasoning is we wouldn’t have the language or brain capacity, then and now, to understand all that the kingdom is and isn’t. In Jesus’ own words, “The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand’” (Matthew 13:13).

Nevertheless, we have the benefit of more than two thousand years of scholars and commentaries to help us discern the meaning of this for our lives today. Just because we think we know what Jesus means when he says the kingdom is like a mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure, a pearl, or even a net, maybe we should throw out our preconceived notions and re-investigate what Jesus is teaching. In this passage I wonder if the last verse, the conclusion to his teaching these parables, is the most revealing of Jesus’ overall purpose. But we’ll get to that.

Jesus uses five similes in this passage to describe things that are indescribable. What is the kingdom like? He tells his followers that the kingdom is like a mustard seed, something that starts small but when planted grows exponentially to the greatest of shrubs and gives protection to God’s creation. It is like yeast that is placed in a dough “until all of it was leavened.” It is like treasure hidden in a field or a pearl of great price – these are so desirable that it’s worth giving up all possessions to obtain them. He says it is like a net thrown into the sea, catching fish of every kind. Hearing these comparisons, do we now understand what the kingdom is like? Really?

On the surface, I get a sense from these comparisons that the kingdom is something that starts small – seed and yeast – but grows and

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. Harper One. 2014. Print. p. 296

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percolates throughout the world until it reaches everywhere and like a net that pulls everybody into it. There is an element of mystery to the amazing growth of God's kingdom from seemingly trivial beginnings. Garden plants, baking bread, and fishing – all things that Jesus' audience would find familiar yet with these images he provokes and sparks imagination. Jesus turns things upside down with these images – yeast in his time did not come from the red and white packages we know today. It was what we today would call "sour-dough starter" if any of you are bakers you know this stuff is unpleasant, kind of smelly, and basically fermented dough. However, once mixed in the recipe you come away with something tasty and aromatically pleasing. Illustrating that even the messy can be part of the kingdom of heaven.

Amy-Jill Levine writes, "perhaps the parable [of the yeast] tells us that despite all our images of golden slippers and harp and halos, the kingdom is present at the communal oven of a Galilean village when everyone has enough to eat."² Jesus has told us that the kingdom is at hand – these images give the sense that the kingdom is in everything and available to all. I also get the sense that in the "already and not yet" of our current age the kingdom will only be "found" when humanity and nature work together, and we do what we were put here to do – to care for creation and each other.

But then, reading the second part of this passage, I say there must be more to it. The hidden treasure and the pearl of great price become discoveries that are so valuable as to compel the "finder" to "sell all that he has" to obtain. That too makes sense to me, having a relationship with God, living in God's kingdom, is more valuable than anything on this earth. "Once we know that material goods will only collect rust or dust, and once we know that the only thing that counts is treasure in heaven, surely we must find a new way to live."³ Jesus may be telling us that we will have to give up our worldly belongings and live differently to truly be a part of the kingdom of heaven. He has said – it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom.

Another element to these parables is how they mention something hidden. The seed is hidden in the ground in order to grow. The yeast is

² IBID p.137

³ IBID p.164

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placed, mixed, or rightly translated hidden in the flour to create the dough, the treasure is hidden, the pearl is hidden, and the net is thrown into the sea to gather the fish. Because these start out as things that need to be discovered or uncovered, there remains that element of mystery. Must we be lucky or skilled to discover these treasures? No, I don't think that is Jesus' message. Notice in all these parables human action is part of the process.

We are rarely the focus; sometimes we are the facilitators and then we must stand back and let God take over. Seeds must be planted and then left to grow. Yeast must be placed in the dough and again left alone to rise. The treasure and the pearl must be found and snatched to become valuable. Maybe the question shouldn't be what's it like or even where it is. The kingdom will appear in its own time – as long as it takes for seed to sprout or dough to rise. In reality, it is already present – budding – in the world, a treasure waiting to be discovered.

When we get to Jesus' "parable" of the net the movement is away from anything within our control to a point in the future – the end of the age. Here is where we learn we are not responsible for separating the "good fish from the bad fish" it is at the end of the age when 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. This image of a net, gathering in all types of fish, suits what I believe to be true about the kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is open to everyone, and the extraordinary attractiveness of God's reign is capable of drawing many people. However, the final catch of the kingdom is discernable only by God, it is only God who is worthy of judging the hearts and desires of people.

Finally, Jesus asks his disciples "Have you understood all this?" and they answer "yes" – of course they do, who would want to be thought thick headed in Jesus' presence. And Jesus tells 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." Jesus is training the trainers by telling his disciples that they must incorporate these new teachings of his with the old Jewish traditions that are most familiar to them. Maybe Jesus is also outlining the basis of the problem he has with the scribes and Pharisees who won't acknowledge there can be anything new from God's word.

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When Jesus' followers go into the towns and villages to teach and illustrate, even when we illustrate the kingdom of heaven for others it is not enough to include just what we know from the wisdom and traditions passed on to us by our ancestors in the faith. We must also search for the treasures hidden in the storehouse of God's wisdom, find the pearls that may still be hidden in God's word. Jesus is telling us that things will be new, and you won't find the kingdom to be exactly as you expect.

Jesus utilized parables to provoke deeper reflection on the Kingdom of Heaven, employing similes like the mustard seed and treasure to describe the indescribable while challenging listeners to confront and re-examine these teachings. While acknowledging that these stories often confuse, I suggest that, despite the inherent limitations in understanding, the parables serve to unlock essential questions about community and faith, encouraging a re-investigation of familiar stories.

The kingdom of heaven is like a seed planted and nurtured until it grows into a great tree that provides shade and shelter for all creation. It is like yeast hidden in so much flour that when it has worked its way through the dough there is enough to feed an entire village. The kingdom is there for everyone and when it is found there is joy compelling us to give up our world for the treasures contained therein. But it is also like a net that gathers fish of every kind and once full and drawn ashore the good fish are saved and the bad fish thrown out. The key in all of this is this statement, "So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous." Do we understand all this? I wonder.