

The Kingdom is Like
A Sermon on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ July 26, 2026

One of my only regrets in life is that, like the rest of you, I never had the opportunity to meet Jesus, face to face. I'm glad I didn't live during Jesus' time, because it was an extremely difficult time. The rich were getting richer, and the poor struggled to survive. Many people died before the age of 30, because of sickness and disease. There was lots of crime and corruption. The Roman governors had the power to determine whether someone would live or die.

So I am glad I didn't live during Jesus' time, but I wish I could have heard Jesus teaching and preaching, and to see him caring for the people. Jesus' words have been powerful and meaningful for every generation that has come after him, but they were a complete surprise, a complete revelation for the people of his time. Jesus gave people a message that was completely opposite from most of what they heard and experienced in the rest of life. The rest of life included a lot of lies, corruption and manipulation, a lot of pain, sadness, grief and fear. Jesus' words brought the people truth and meaning. Jesus' words brought them joy and hope.

People soon realized that when Jesus was speaking, it was a sacred time. Something holy was happening as he spoke to them. It was so different from the rest of their lives. Jesus helped the people understand that they were God's beloved children. Jesus' preaching was so memorable and powerful that people remembered what he said, and wrote down as much as they could remember. So we have little bits of some of Jesus' sermons, spread across the four Gospels.

Today's Gospel passage is one of my favorites. Jesus said, "*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.*" Jesus is helping people see and understand more about the life God intends for us.

Let's notice that Jesus does not say, "The kingdom of heaven is..." He says, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." We cannot fully describe the kingdom of heaven, because it's from God. It is not exactly like any one thing in our lives. But people can understand this idea about a tiny seed that grows into an enormous shrub.

Jesus didn't stop there. He said, *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.*"

We see what Jesus is doing here. The kingdom of heaven is not just one thing, or one idea, or one direction. We will never understand everything about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' preaching is like a poem, or like an impressionist painting by Monet. He cannot describe the kingdom of heaven directly, but he can give us clues that help us move in the right direction.

Jesus continues, saying, *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.*

At the risk of placing a few of my words next to Jesus' words, let's take a minute to consider the broad strokes of what Jesus is saying. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that grows into the largest bush. The kingdom of heaven is powerful, and has tremendous potential for growth, even when God's activity and presence seem to be very small and insignificant.

In another place Jesus says, *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.* Yes, the

kingdom of heaven is like treasure we might discover by accident. The treasure of the kingdom is not something we have earned, it is something we are overjoyed to find in our lives, though we have done nothing to deserve it. If we understand the treasure that has been given to us, we leave everything else behind, in order to pursue the kingdom of heaven.

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. This is the other side of the same idea. Sometimes the kingdom of heaven is something we search and search and search for. Though we get discouraged, we don't give up. We keep searching. Finally, after a long search, when we find the kingdom life happening in our world, in some unexpected place, we put aside things that distract us, and devote ourselves to the kingdom life.

The kingdom of heaven is sometimes one thing and sometimes another, and the second thing is almost the opposite of the first thing. The kingdom of heaven has many different points of entry for us, and it carries many meanings and ideas. The kingdom of heaven is multivalent, which means it's not just one thing, or just one picture.

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. This one is different, which makes sense because the kingdom of heaven is not just one thing or one picture. The kingdom of heaven is big and wide, like a net, so many people are drawn into the net of the kingdom.

But people do not have free reign to do whatever they feel like doing after they are drawn into God's net. There is still judgment in the kingdom of heaven. Many, many people talk about God and Jesus, but God isn't interested in our words. God asks us to love one another. Some people talk about Jesus, and hate the people who are different from them. Jesus is saying, "God will judge." God will judge the people who say they love God, yet do violence or lie or show no mercy for their neighbors. That is yet another life giving part of the kingdom of heaven, because it means it's not my job to judge and condemn others.

And now we have my favorite one. *The kingdom of heaven is like yeast.* The funny thing is that, even though I have made hundreds of loaves of bread and hundreds of batches of pizza dough using yeast, I have the same doubts about the yeast every time I add yeast to the water and honey and flour in my mixing bowl. I brought in some jars of yeast so you can see what I am talking about.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast. There are times when the yeast in the jar looks beautiful, but sometimes I wonder if the yeast in the jar is actually alive. It looks very dry, even dead to me. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast. We have our doubts about whether it is alive, whether it's real.

And every time, after two or three thousand times when I have doubted whether the yeast was alive, the yeast shows that it is alive, and there are great big enormous bubbles of yeasty dough moving around in my mixing bowl. I can't believe it! It seems like a miracle to me, every time! The kingdom of heaven is like yeast. The kingdom of heaven might seem like it is dead and lifeless. It is not dead. We are surprised every time.

In the Gospels, Jesus and John the Baptist remind us that the kingdom of heaven is very near to us. Here are a few examples from St. Paul's Church that tell what the kingdom might be like.

The kingdom of heaven is like a group of volunteers who walk into the Hansen Dining Room on a Monday. The room is packed with tables piled high with rummage. There is so much rummage you can barely walk. On the floor there are piles of sporting goods and teepees and giant Christmas decorations. The volunteers do not turn on their heels and walk out the door. They work together. They don't argue or say mean things to each other. The next day more people come and help prepare for the rummage sale. By Thursday everything is ready; everything is in its place. The kingdom of heaven is like a wise, energetic, loving crew of volunteers who bring order to a place of chaos.

The kingdom of heaven is like a Vestry meeting where the members puzzle over the details of an important project for the church for an hour. Everyone shares their ideas. Even one or two people who say they won't vote in favor of the resolution share their ideas to make it better. The Vestry members don't put each other down or say mean things to each other. The kingdom of heaven is like a church Vestry that works together patiently to make the difficult decisions for the sake of God's church.

The kingdom of heaven is like a congregation that had no small children attending, but the members made the decision that a children's ministry was one of their top priorities. For several years, not much happened, and there still weren't any little children in church, but the members never gave up on their vision of what was most important. They didn't give up. Instead they made plans and began working. They created a new, beautiful place for children in their building. And nine years later there were many children in church, reading scripture lessons, writing Prayers of the People, standing next to the priest as he consecrated the bread and wine, and watching the adults participate. The kingdom of heaven is like a congregation that did not give up on their vision.

So I have an assignment for you. Your assignment is to look for signs of the kingdom of heaven in your life. I encourage you to think and speak about our life, the way Jesus was thinking and speaking about our life. I encourage you to find the words, to name a clue about the kingdom of heaven when you see it. In a time of sadness, grief and fear I encourage you to look for places of hope and joy. The kingdom of heaven has come, very near to you.