

"Kingdom Parables"  
July 30, 2017  
Text: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ  
8th Sunday after Pentecost

*He put before them 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."*

### The Grand Finale

Today we finish a short series in Matthew's gospel featuring parables told by Jesus—parables that describe the kingdom of heaven. His teaching to the crowd today concludes with a barrage of five parables, one after the other; like the grand finale of a firework display on the Fourth of July.

All these parables that are meant to stretch our minds and to excite our imaginations as Jesus redefines this thing he is always referring to—the kingdom of heaven. And like always, he contextualizes his teaching to the audience in front of him with relevance, using images and references that make perfect sense.

### Parables Then

*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.*

Sure they get that. The people knew the nuisance mustard plant. And they all knew about the small size of the seed. But in the parable, the mustard plant becomes a tree, a *good* tree that provides shelter for every bird in the sky. Something that starts off small and insignificant takes everyone by surprise when it becomes large and hospitable. That's the kingdom of heaven for you.

Then he talks about that nasty stuff called yeast, that slightly "off" substance, left over from one loaf of bread to make the next one rise. It doesn't take much of it, and in the parable just a pinch is enough to makes three loaves expand to fullness. And that's the kingdom of heaven, a small but powerful agent of growth and change. It's the story of Jesus and the kingdom.

But the kingdom of heaven is also like that treasure that someone finds and then hides until the field can be purchased by selling all their possessions. With something of great value, giving up everything to secure it is worth it.

What kind of value are we talking about? Well, up goes another parable—a parable about pearls. The kind of pearl that you spend a lifetime looking for if you're a collector of such things. And when you find it, you will sell everything you have to buy that pearl. That's the kind of treasure the kingdom of heaven is.

And then, there's one more parable to describe this new reality Jesus is talking about, preaching about, and praying about: the parable of the fisherman's net. That large net that catches every kind of fish in the sea. It gets filled and is pulled into shore. And then the sorting out begins. The good catch goes here, and the bad catch goes there. Yes, there are some parts of that catch that are not good and are removed from the good. They are discarded, or, as Jesus describes, thrown into the fire where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, the place where evil always ends up. Anything that is not pure and leads toward darkness and death is removed.

That's the teaching Jesus gives about the kingdom of heaven—this kingdom that his very existence ushers in to the human race.

### Parables Now

What do we do with this teaching? What can the kingdom of heaven have to do with us now? "*What is this kingdom of heaven you keep talking about?*" you might hear. How might Jesus explain it to someone today?

The kingdom of heaven is like an online video that goes viral. On Monday morning a video is posted of a five year old boy born deaf miraculously hearing for the first time and by Tuesday afternoon it has three million views, and by Friday it's been seen twenty million times.

Or the kingdom of heaven is like the Large Hadron atomic supercollider in which tiny particles called protons are sent around a 17 mile loop at nearly the speed of light to collide with other protons sent around in the opposite direction. When they do collide there's enough energy to melt 1100 pounds of copper.

These are small things that become big and have a large impact.

But also, the kingdom of heaven is like someone finding an original hand-written copy of the Declaration of Independence hidden in the back of a painting. Then they go and sell everything they have to buy that painting.

Or the kingdom of heaven is like a person who collects valuable cars. But then they come across a car that was owned and driven by Dale Earnhardt, and they sell all their cars to have that car.

These are things of great value.

And one more. The kingdom of heaven is like a next generation computer that contains all the books ever written and every movie ever made and every song there ever was. But then they will all get sorted, and only the good stuff will remain, and everything else will be deleted.

So it will be at the end of the age when all evil and darkness and that which brings death to the soul will be separated from that which is righteous and brings healing and wholeness and life.

### Our Mission

The good news is that even today, thank God, the kingdom of heaven has come near. With the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the kingdom of heaven has crashed into our world and continues to expand and hold great value.

Parables may change. The ways of expressing truth may change, but the truth itself remains. The kingdom of heaven is this truth, and this truth is manifested in the reality of Jesus Christ. Heaven is not far off. It is not some geographic location at some future moment, after we die. Eternity has already begun. *The kingdom of heaven*, as Jesus and John the Baptist before him always said, *has come near*. Since then, it has not been removed or diminished. Nor has our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

We represent this kingdom in which forgiveness covers sins. This is a kingdom in which reconciliation one to another is valued over vengeance. It's a kingdom populated by peacemakers, life-givers, and justice seekers; a kingdom where the least are valued most, the lost are sought after, the lonely are comforted, and the broken are healed. We pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is heaven, which means the proud will be brought down and the humble lifted up, and the mightiest will be the servant of all. It's quite amazing to know that all of it is defined by the most important person in all of history; a person with the name of Jesus, a name which itself carries untold power; a person who shows us the nature of God—God himself who came into this world as a tiny baby, a mustard seed, and expanded and continues to expand the kingdom of heaven in our midst.

And about that last sentence in today's passage when Jesus says,

*"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."*

Scribes in that day were the learned ones. They were comprehensively trained scholars of the ancient scriptures. But along comes Jesus and makes things more easily understood for us through storytelling and parables. We, then, are a new kind of scribes—simply students of the Way, being trained for the kingdom of heaven. And

Jesus says we're like the master of a household with great treasure. And some of that treasure is old and some of it is new. Some of it is tradition and some of it is newly minted revelation. Some of it is ancient and some of it is future. Some of it is the wisdom of grandparents, and some of it is the brave new wisdom of a young person in today's world. But if it is of the kingdom of heaven, know this: it will be true, it will be ever-expanding, and it will be of great value. And when you happen to catch just a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven, get it, grab it, and do whatever it takes to keep it. Amen.