

9th Sunday after Easter – Proper 12, Year A
A Sermon Preached by Fr Ian M Delinger
on July 26, 2026

Genesis 29:15-28 / Psalm 128 / Romans 8:26-39 / Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

*When your word goes forth it gives light, O Lord,
Steady our footsteps in Your word*

Does anyone else here find it puzzling that Jesus never likens the Kingdom of Heaven to a grand palace, or a Caribbean resort, or an abundant platinum mine, or a king with a powerful army? He always likens the Kingdom of Heaven to the most mundane things, leaving me thinking: *How did you even get to that place to liken the Kingdom of Heaven to a mustard seed?* But that is what we are presented with today – the Kingdom of Heaven is like these obscure things: a mustard seed, yeast, a treasure, a merchant, a net and the master of a household. How are we to be inspired by that?

Here's how you *might* understand what the Kingdom of Heaven is like from today's parables:

- something immense and immeasurable that will grow from something miniscule;
- something tiny that gives life to the masses;
- something so valuable that one would give up everything to obtain it;
- someone who can spot which one is of the highest value;
- something that captures all, but is still discerning;
- someone who understands the value of what is old and what is new.

If we started there, we wouldn't be half-wrong. In *our* context, using these simple aspects of life to illustrate the unimaginable Kingdom of Heaven works! The mustard seed and the yeast help us understand the magnitude of the Kingdom of Heaven, coming from something you can't even see. The treasure and the pearl help us realize the Kingdom of Heaven is far more valuable than anything we could ever possess here on earth. And the net reminds us that we will all get a

chance at the Kingdom of Heaven, but not all will accept the chance. And through these similes, we begin to understand the Kingdom of Heaven.

So, we're not half-wrong. But this is Jesus, so, if we start there, we're still half-wrong. In *Jesus'* context, the implications of His illustration aides take us to a much deeper place, revealing a Kingdom of Heaven that is far more antagonistic than conformist, far more countercultural than common, far more discerning than all-encompassing. The shock of the hearers of these illustration aides would lead *themselves* to separate into the good fish and the bad fish.

- Mustard was a weed, a very invasive weed. And we learned last week that, when you pull out the weeds, you also pull out the crop.
- Leaven was a contaminant. The woman of the household would spend days ensuring that all leaven was eradicated from the house before the Passover was celebrated. And leaven was made from a rotting piece of bread that, if not rotted properly, didn't work or destroyed the batch.
- And listen more closely to the guy who found a treasure in a field and then bought it. He was a thief! He found a treasure *in someone else's field*! What was he doing in that person's field in the first place?
- Those termed "merchants" were swindlers. The transaction around that pearl was not completely above board!

The use of these most unlikely characters would have been shocking to those listening and to the early hearers of Matthew's Gospel. They should be shocking to us, too. They would have and should have us asking why the opposite of polite society, the rich and powerful, those whose every move influences thousands, even millions of people are not illustrations of the Kingdom of Heaven.

- Why isn't the Kingdom of Heaven like a computer chip and the executives of Nvidia?
- Why isn't the Kingdom of Heaven like Artificial Intelligence that can create anything out of nothing in seconds?
- Why isn't the Kingdom of Heaven like the hard-fought World Cup trophy?

- Why isn't the Kingdom of Heaven like the United States of America with the world's largest economy and most powerful military in human history?!

Because the Kingdom of Heaven isn't about status and power. The Kingdom of Heaven is about *you*! Jesus is trying to tell *you* that *you* belong in the Kingdom of Heaven. Whether you think of the Kingdom of Heaven in our modern, more positive terms, or in Jesus' more countercultural context, Jesus says the magnificent divine realm is hidden right in front of you, and all you need to do is be faithful and perceptive, and the Kingdom will be revealed.

To realize that the Kingdom of Heaven is about *us* – about *you* – makes space for the bigger questions:

- Is the Kingdom already here?
- Is it some divine place that we will enjoy if we live our lives in God?
- Will it arrive or appear here when Christ returns?

Now that we know that we do not and should not concern ourselves with status and power, we can reflect on these questions in our prayer life.

- If it's already here, then we have to search for it – like the treasure or the pearl.
- If it's a divine place, we have to understand that its magnitude is beyond our comprehension, like the mustard seed or the yeast.
- If it will arrive or appear here when Christ returns, like the net or the master, then we better make sure that we are the wheat or the good fish. Like the old bumper sticker: *Jesus is coming! Look busy!*

But mostly, we need to understand that we are worthy simply as who we are. My personal tutor at seminary told me just before I finished and was to be ordained: *God calls the person you are now, not the person God wants you to be.* Jesus is saying something similar today when you read this in His context, with the antagonistic, countercultural, discerning lens. The unlikely magnificence of the Kingdom of Heaven of our context is being offered and opened to everyone,

including the most undeserving. But you do have to work for it. You have to be faithful and loving. You can't be complacent.

Today's Gospel should be read through the lens of discipleship: *what it means to be a follower of Jesus*. Each of these similes is an illustration of giving one's all for the Kingdom, whether it's the tiny seed giving its all to become the giant bush, or the thief selling all that he had to buy the field, Jesus demands complete faithfulness. Theologian Francis Wright Beare wrote:

Anyone who counts the cost of discipleship has completely failed to grasp the greatness of the reward.

Let me put it another way:

If you need to see a menu with prices on it, you can't afford it!

That's what is at stake in Jesus' words today. He is trying to get us to understand the magnitude of the Kingdom of Heaven while at the same time emphasizing that it's not your status and power that will get you there – it's your faithfulness. God is calling you as you are now, not someone you will be in the future. And while many of us still need menus with prices on them, we can still be on this journey to discover the Kingdom of Heaven that has been opened to us. But what *is* discipleship? What does following Jesus actually look like?

The Vestry and others in the congregation are reviewing and beginning to implement the ministry of *Invite – Welcome – Connect*. It's not only a ministry that focuses on congregational growth; it's a ministry that leads to deeper discipleship. The author of the companion book, Mary Parmer, wrote of each element:

- *The deep truth of Invite is courage. It takes courage to invite someone to church ... We need to invite, and then leave the rest up to God and Holy Spirit.*

- *The deep truth of Welcome is seeing the other – offering a relationship rather than simply membership.*
- *The deep truth of Connect is the sacred act of listening ... Just as love of God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for our brothers and sisters is learning to listen to them.¹*

This is a great framework for what discipleship is. It helps us look at where we are today – you as an individual Christian in this place, and us collectively as St Stephen’s – and then discover the path for our spiritual journey in 3 simple words that become 3 simple actions, that we know that, despite being simple, they come at a cost. Jesus is asking us to ignore the cost and head straight for the prize. Because the deep truth of discipleship is *faith*.

The discipleship shaped by *Invite – Welcome – Connect* will lead you to generate abundance out of seemingly nothing. It will lead to the discernment in finding the treasure that God has hidden for you. It will help you discover the value in both the old and the new. And all this will be done for the glory of God, not for the glory of self.

Paul gives us the strength we need for this journey called discipleship:

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

We have *help* for this journey! As we learn how to *Invite – Welcome – Connect*, we learn more about what it means to follow Jesus – to be disciples. As we learn how to be disciples, we will begin to see the mustard seed and what it will become, to see the finest pearl, to see that the Kingdom of Heaven is already here, and it is a divine place, and it will arrive when Christ returns, because the

¹ *Invite – Welcome – Connect: Stories & Tools to Transform Your Church* by Mary Parmer, Forward Movement, 2024.

Kingdom of Heaven is far beyond our comprehension. We just need to keep wrestling with the deep truth of discipleship: *faith*.

That place where we started with these parables? Well, while we were half-wrong, we were still half-right. To appreciate the simple nature of a mustard seed, yeast, a treasure, a merchant, a net and the master of a household, we can still discover that the Kingdom of Heaven:

- is something seemingly insignificant that will become something unimaginably magnificent!
- It will come, not with fanfare and grandeur, but from the hidden place it may now be in.
- It will focus on the present – *our* present – not a future that we must wait for.
- It will center on what we do as believers, careful to parse out unbelievers.

Today's Gospel draws out those characteristics of the Kingdom of Heaven as well as the antagonistic, countercultural and discerning nature. But the main point is that the Kingdom of Heaven is not a grand palace, or a Caribbean resort, or an abundant platinum mine, or a king with a powerful army. It's not about *power*. It's about *love*. It's about *you*. As you go along your journey with Jesus, let the prices on the menu fade. Have faith in God, and trust that the Spirit will lead you to true discipleship through which you will discover the Kingdom of Heaven. And if you have true faith in God through Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit and are open to this journey of discipleship – wherever you are on that spiritual journey:

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate [you] from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.