

Pastor Barry South, CRE First Presbyterian Church Grand Bay July 26, 2026

OPENING SENTENCE: The plants and trees show God's presence, Let us join with creation in praising God.

PRAYER of ADORATION: God of grace, You have made our minds, so help us to know you. You have made our hearts, so help us to love you. You have made our voices, so help us to sing your praise. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, so together we may celebrate your glory. And worship you in spirit and in truth, through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN.

Sermon: "The Kingdom of Heaven Is Like"

Scripture: Matthew 13:31-33; 44-52

PRAYER of ILLUMINATION: Gracious God, your word is a living word. By your Spirit awaken us, that we may see and hear your presence in the world and in the scripture that we read today. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our brother and guide. AMEN.

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 drew 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.

Mustard and yeast, a thief and a merchant. One is struck by the shady, subversive, corrupted presenting character of these parables, especially in contrast to the portrayal, in the other parts of chapter 13, of fruitfulness, separating weeds from wheat, and judgement that sorts the true disciples from the others. Mustard is a weed the farmers would pull from a field, but here God's empire is compared to the mustard seed, starting very small but growing into a shrub. Yeast (or leaven), the agent that bloats and rots corpses and what a woman would clean from her house in preparation for Passover, is here a positive: God is fermenting the empire of the heavens within the world, like the woman who mixes – or spoils – flour with yeast.

Finding the empire of the heavens is compared to a man who finds a treasure in someone else's field and then liquidates all his assets to buy the field without telling the owner about the treasure. What was the man doing digging around in someone else's field in the first place? His action is a theft.

Merchants were held in public esteem about as highly as our culture values used-car salesmen. Their motives and scruples were suspect. This merchant, however, in effect puts himself out of business by selling everything to make an ultimate purchase. Once one has sacrificed everything to make the ultimate purchase, there is nothing left to buy and sell.

I wonder if the crowds were disappointed – perhaps some of the disciples too? Jesus tells one more parable about seeds and plants, followed by stories of baking bread, plowing a field, and fishing. Yes, he throws in one story about a wealthy merchant, but all the rest are as ordinary as a mustard bush. No kings, or even

princes, populate these parables of the kingdom. No military generals or revolutionary leaders to please Simon the Zealot or his colleague Judas. They must have felt let down.

I wonder if our congregations might be disappointed too. I doubt their visions of heaven include mustard bushes and housework. God is more often seen as “Lord” or “King” than farmer or baker woman.

Likewise, most contemporary Christian music sings about “enthroning” Jesus, raising him up and exalting him in the highest heaven.

However, the stories Jesus tells of his kingdom and that of heaven are down to earth, literally. They are common stories about ordinary people – a tenant farmer, a housewife, fishermen – doing everyday things. This is hardly an exalted vision of God’s realm.

Of course, that is the whole point. As Christians, we are called to believe in the incarnation, the mystery of the meeting of the divine and human in the person of Jesus Christ. In his parables, Jesus puts that incarnational focus not on himself but on the world around him. “The kingdom of God is like “mustard seed, yeast, treasure in a field, merchant in search of pearls, and fishing nets, the most common things in human life. Like Jesus himself, this everyday world embodies the sacred meeting of divine and human, if only we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

In that embodiment, his parables differ significantly from the Greek or Roman myths or Aesop’s fables. Jesus’ stories have no gods in human disguise or talking animals, just real-life women and men going about their everyday work.

According to Matthew, the first thing Jesus does when he comes out of the wilderness is to proclaim, “The Kingdom of heaven has come near” (3:2). He demonstrates that nearness every time he heals someone, reaches out to outcast, respects women, or cares for the poor. He also demonstrates that nearness through these kingdom parables.

For Jesus, God’s realm is not some esoteric (private or secret) kingdom in the sweet by and by, but as close as the next mustard bush or loaf of bread. That nearness, far more than the treat of eternal agony, is the basis for his call to belief. Of these five parables, only the last includes apocalyptic judgement and gnashing of teeth. The rest envision God in every nook and cranny of daily life, from kneading of dough to plowing fields. Jesus transforms human life not by scaring the hell out of people, but by helping them see the heaven close at hand.

Offering such images of God’s realm, Jesus echoes his ancestor Moses’s farewell address to his people. At the edge of the promised land, Moses reminds the Israelites that “the word is very near” them, in their hearts and close at hand (Deut. 30:14). In his earthy kingdom parables, Jesus affirms that truth.

Moreover, Jesus does not use the seven wonders of the world to envision God’s kingdom. He does not even use a stately cedar of Lebanon, but a lowly mustard plant. Its seed is a symbol of the tiniest thing, and the plant it produces is a trash tree – or more accurately, a trash bush, no matter how tall it gets. Mustards are the Kudzu and salt cedars of their day. How is that for an image of God’s realm?

Then there is the leaven for 100 loaves of bread, in a tradition where yeast is a symbol of corruption and impurity. In Jesus’ parable, though, yeast becomes the agent of miraculous growth of God’s kingdom. If God can use mustard seed and corrupt leaven to grow the kingdom, image what God can do with you. Abundance from the smallest of things, miraculous transformations from trash bush to tree of life of life, from corrupt leaven to bread enough to feed the multitudes. God’s kingdom is like that, according to Jesus. No wonder the next two parables tell of people who gladly give up everything for that treasure. The extravagant response of the tenant farmer and the pearl merchant is matched only by the extravagant mustard bush and loaves of bread of the preceding parables.

Of course, the paradox is that a kingdom worth the price of the great pearl or the hidden treasure is not made of silver or gold, but of bushes and bread. Would you give up all you have for a crop of Kudzu? No simple moral fables, Jesus’ parables demand such decisions. Like Moses last words, the parables underscore our responsibility to choose God’s way. Moses frames it as a choice between life or death, blessing or curse (Deut. 30:15). Jesus’ parables assume the existence of the realm of God verses that of the evil one, good fish or bad fish. Like Moses, Jesus does not let us off the hook. The nearness of God’s realm challenges us daily to choose that realm.

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY:

The story is told of a man who had been on the outs with the church ever since his adolescent days. The church, he said, was too concerned about the rules, so he left and said he was finished with it. His father worked on him, begging him to give the church another chance, and finally the man agreed that he would. He got up the nerve one Sunday and wandered into a church. The congregation was in the middle of the prayer of confession. “We have done those things which we ought not to have done and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and there is no health in us.” The man heard that and smiled to himself. “Good!” he said, “This sounds like my kind of crowd.”

Ironically, because they are so rooted in this world, Jesus’ parables may keep us from experiencing that realm in our world. For most in our congregations, mustard is found in plastic bottles on the supermarket shelf, bread comes in plastic bags, and pearls go for discount prices on the Home Shopping Network. These first century Palestinian parables can be as foreign to us as any otherworldly vision of God’s realm. The final parable comes as a closing statement to the disciples; like Jesus, the disciples will be scribes. Those with whom the secrets of the kingdom have been shared now become teachers of those secrets. So the discourse ends with a reminder, the truly wise teacher will recognize that there is value to be found in the old as well as the new, and wisdom honors truth as found in either.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed” – a tiny symbol of how God is forever invading our orderly sense of things. It just hides there – in the sack, in the hand, in the church, in the mind of God – like a mustard seed, like a treasure hidden in a field, like a pearl of great value hidden amid the rest, like the tasty fish hidden amid the whole catch.

So, find new parables. What in your world produces the abundance of a mustard seed? In our time, what is like yeast or leaven, disdained as corrupt, but actually an agent of God’s transforming power? Like the man plowing the field or the merchant searching for the pearl, what would you or your congregation give up everything to possess?

Like Jesus, tell new stories to speak timeless truths. Look at the world around you through his eyes. Then open the eyes and ears of your fellow congregation to his vision of heaven close at hand.

PRAYER:

God of creation, we give thanks for the goodness of the earth that you made and sustain. Our voices join in praise with all creation; with the seas that roars, the trees that clap their hands, and the birds that sing in joy. Unite us by your Spirit, that we may be signs of your abundant mercy and live in thanksgiving for your grace, as we wait for completion of your creation in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. AMEN.

BENEDICTION: A popular approach to this text is to focus upon the dramatic growth of the mustard seed – a tiny and unremarkable seed from which can grow, in practically no time at all, a fifteen-foot tree big and leafy enough to provide shade and habitat for birds in the hot Middle Eastern climate. This theme – of phenomenal growth from something small – offers great encouragement for the church in every age. GO IN PEACE!