

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: July 30, 2023, Year A, 9th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Title: Like What?

Focus: Jesus uses parables to describe what the kingdom (or reign) of heaven is like.

Parables are a form of figurative language which prompt us to think and reflect. How do we ourselves express this Good News of God's activity and presence in the world?

Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

³¹[Jesus] put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³²it 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." ³³He 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."

⁴⁴"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. ⁴⁵"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. ⁴⁷"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁵¹"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." ⁵²And 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 Benefit of Figurative Language

Maybe you could explain these phrases:

- What do people mean when something is "Like a hot knife through butter."
 - It's easy to do.
- What about if something "Cuts like a knife?"
 - It's something metaphorically sharp, as in a sharp comment or remark.
 - Also, something that stings, like severely cold weather.
- What about if you "go under the knife?"
 - You're expecting surgery.
- He's got ants in his pants.
 - He can't sit still.

- Could you explain the difference between “a warm welcome” and “giving someone the cold shoulder” and “freezing someone out.”
- What’s happening if you “Have all your ducks in a row?”
 - Everything is prepared and in order.
- What does it mean to be “As busy as a bee” or you’re “As slow as molasses?”
- They won the lottery and they are “drowning in money.”

When I moved from Southern California to Johnson City, TN, I learned some I had not heard before. Here’s one I had not known:

- “I’ve got a wild hair.”
 - That’s like a “crazy idea.” It’s a fervent, sudden desire to do something impulsive. I guess it comes from a literal expression—like the itchy feeling on the back of your neck from the stray hairs after you get a haircut.

How do you express something which is difficult to convey?

You might use **figurative language**, like the **similes** or **metaphors** in some of these phrases, which can convey something with greater nuance or impact. They have greater punch to teach or persuade. They are catchy or puzzling and stick with us and make us think.

- A simile is a comparison, usually between two different things you wouldn’t think go together, and typically includes the words “like” or “as.”
 - “Life is like a box of chocolates,” says Forrest Gump.
- A metaphor is another kind of comparison—another figure of speech in which you describe something by saying it’s like something else. Like the phrases or figures of speech in our earlier examples, they’re not meant to be taken literally, but their meaning and impact depend on a person contemplating the likeness between these two things.
 - “Life is a highway.”
 - “Her eyes are diamonds.”

Part of their appeal is their cleverness. As I said, they’re not meant to be taken literally—her eyes aren’t *literally* diamonds, but the cleverness of the metaphor gets you thinking—her eyes must be sparkly, they’re rare, they’re precious—or whatever a diamond conveys.

Jesus Cleverly Told Parables as Figurative Speech

How do you express something which is difficult to convey?

The difficult to convey thing that Jesus was trying to describe is the Kingdom of Heaven. What is that like?

And so, he said, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like. . .”

Jesus told parables to convey something about the kingdom or reign of heaven.

Like the similes, metaphors and colorful phrases we have mentioned, parables are another example of figurative speech. Jesus made comparisons and told stories in

such a way to get us thinking about the Kingdom of Heaven (or the *Kingdom of God*, which is the term used in Mark and Luke).

Parables can be extended stories about everyday life in Jesus' time and culture, like the Parable of the Sower, The Prodigal Son, or the "Good Samaritan."

They can also be brief, like they are in today's passage. The parables in today's reading are more like a simile or metaphor like some of the examples at the start of the sermon than they are an extended narrative like the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son.

Pondering these Images

"Life is like a box of chocolates," says Tom Hanks as Forest Gump as he's sitting on the bus stop talking with anyone curious enough to listen. What does he mean by that?

He himself briefly explains: "You never know what you're going to get." We start to think about it:

- He means a *box* of chocolates, not just a single chocolate bar. If you buy a single Hershey bar, you know exactly what you are going to get, whether it's milk chocolate or dark or plain or with almonds or other nuts.
- But those *big, assorted* boxes have all kinds of chocolates. *You never know what you're going to get.*
- So, what does the comparison suggest? Life is unpredictable. Life is full of surprises.

And as we ponder that simile or metaphor, other insights emerge.

- He's suggesting that you have to approach life as an adventure.
 - "Jump in! Try things!"
 - "Don't be afraid!"—or maybe, "It's okay if you're a bit afraid—but don't let it stop you from trying new things!"
 - "Be flexible. Be positive." Orient yourself in such a way that you're able to handle the inevitable surprises. You don't know what those surprises will be, but you know there will be some surprises.

All these words of wisdom could be suggested by this single phrase. That's how rich this kind of figurative language can be.

In the same way, Jesus tells us parables which invite us to ponder the richness of the images and reflect on what they convey about the kingdom of heaven, which has to do with God's mission and presence in the world—with how God works in the world.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like. . . a mustard seed.

- This isn't the first time Jesus has told a parable about a mustard seed. The other time was when he talked about having faith the size of a mustard seed—

emphasizing that it is small, but surprisingly powerful or can create a big impact. It exceeds expectations.

- He refers to the size and surprising power here, too: “it is the smallest of all the seeds. . .” (Mt. 13:32)
- But adds an additional emphasis—
“ . . . 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.”

Suggesting that the kingdom of heaven is like creating a safe place, a sense of home, security and belonging.

The kingdom of heaven is like creating a home for those who have no home—the birds of the air. Last week, we talked about our Welcome Statement and marching in the Pride Parade. One of the lines from our Welcome Statement is “Welcome especially to those who have ever been made to feel unwelcome by the church” —suggesting those who have no (church) home.

I talked last Sunday to a church member who had made a gift to our RIC Project supporting this aspect of our ministry. Her reason for giving, she said, was, “Everyone should have a church to go to.” She is a part of creating a sense of home or belonging for those who have felt unwelcome.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like. . . yeast.

- What else does that simile suggest to you?
- Like the mustard seed, it is small, but powerful.
- It has the ability to transform ordinary objects—flour, water, sugar, and salt—into risen bread—into something pleasing which sustains life.

And what does that suggest about the kingdom of heaven?

- How does the kingdom of heaven have the ability to transform ordinary things—ordinary people—into things which are pleasant and life-giving?

There’s another surprise to discover here: Jesus says that “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.”

“Mixed in” (v. 43), is how it’s translated in the NRSV which we read today. “*Hidden*” is how other translations put it. I am intrigued by the Greek verb, which is

- egkruptó (eng-kroop'-to) This is the Greek word from which we get *encryption*, which is something hidden or secret.

The word only appears here and in a parallel passage in Luke 13:21. It describes the kingdom of God as it spreads its influence and yet is not readily detected.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like. . . treasure in a field:

This parallel or comparison has twist:

⁴⁴“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.

The treasure is hidden in a field. The person found the treasure, hid it again, and then goes and buys the field.

The story or plot moves swiftly, without explanation for each step. It doesn't say that the person was looking for the treasure or expected it. But there is joy with the unexpected discovery, then they decide to conceal what they have found, and then they value this so much that they go all in to purchase the field which contains the treasure they never expected to find.

In March of this year when I was making follow up phone calls to those who have attended our New Member Orientation, I talked with a gentlemen who said when he first came to Good Shepherd in the fall it was a bit due to general curiosity and that they didn't know what to expect. He said that they have been surprised that the sense of community and worship has meant more to them than he expected and that they decided to formally join Good Shepherd. That sounds like finding unexpected treasure.

How is God's presence in the world like that—like a treasure which you discover and then with joy full invest yourself in? What's that worth?

Reflecting on that prompts listeners to ask ourselves, “Am I all in? What is most important to me? What do I fully invest myself in?”

The Kingdom of Heaven is like. . . a merchant searching for pearls—finds one & spent all he had to buy it.

Like the unexpected treasure, this parable continues to prompt the hear-er to think about what we value. They both find treasure—something of great value. The person in the field finds the treasure unexpectedly, while the other goes looking for it. The merchant is intentionally looking for pearls and discovers one so unique that he sells all he has to buy it.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like. . . a net thrown into the sea—

There are three different Greek words which are translated “net” in the New Testament.¹

This is a particular type of net. In Greek, it's *sagéné* (sag-AY'-nay), which is the word for a *dragnet*. It's different from a *casting net*, which one person can throw out into the water by him or herself. A dragnet is much bigger. Its purpose is to capture everything in its path. To use it effectively, it would take at least two people—and,

¹ Peggy Overstreet, “Net” in Greek Word Studies. Posted March 31, 2007. <http://greekwordstudies.blogspot.com/2007/03/net.html#:~:text=There%20are%20three%20different%20Greek,and%20Proverbs%2029%3A5>).

depending on how large it was, even several boats worth of fishermen, to drag it from sea to shore.

Clear and Understandable? Or not?

Did you notice how this conversation with the disciples ends? Jesus asks them,
⁵¹“Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.”

I scoff at that—how can that be? Do they really understand all of this? Or are they just saying that, like a student in a classroom who doesn’t wish to admit the material is puzzling.

But maybe that’s just the point—that there is no one right, correct, clear meaning to a parable. Like the imaginative phrases we used to open the sermon with their similes and metaphors and other figurative language, the intentional nature of a parable is not to have a direct, immediate meaning, but to draw us into them, inviting us to experience them and mull them over.

After all, Jesus says, this is what the kingdom or reign of heaven *is like*; it’s not a rigid, *this is how it is*.

So, we are invited to ponder or imagine: What is the kingdom like, here and now? How is God active and present in the world?

- How would you describe a treasure that you’ve discovered?
- The joy that you know?
- How would you put to words something that means so much that you fully invest yourself in it?
- How would you describe this Good News?

The Kingdom of Heaven is like what?

May we demonstrate with our lives and find words to express this Good News.