

So Many Parables
Sermon preached July 26, 2026
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
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Toward the end today's Gospel text, Jesus asks the crowds: "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." If asked, I might hedge a little - "Do we understand all this?" Well, sort of?! Jesus speaks in parables to describe the "impossible to imagine" kingdom of God, using terms and images that people can grasp. Yet he is quick to follow up with other examples - layering the parables one on top of the next; so we aren't able to oversimplify things. It's like he's saying, "The kingdom of God is like this, but not exactly like this."

Earlier this week, Brother Jamie Nelson of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, wrote this:

Jesus' frequent use of parables points to a complicated truth: that the beauty, goodness, and power of God will stay beyond our knowing in this lifetime. So why use parables? Parables create space for wondering and for wrestling with God. Parables invite further seeking - they don't set up tidy answers to regurgitate on command. Parables plant the seeds of the kingdom.¹

I love the way Brother Nelson describes parables as opening up space for wondering and for wrestling with God. Though this week's text challenges that a bit.

Today Jesus tosses multiple parables at us in fast-paced succession. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like buried treasure, like a fine pearl, like a net cast into the sea. These five flashes of the kingdom come at us so quickly that there's no time to take them in, ask questions, or ponder their meaning.

In her famous sermon about this Gospel, preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

Jesus zings us with [parables] - one, two, three, four, five - like snapshots, like scenes glimpsed through the windows of a fast-moving train. The kingdom of heaven is like this and this and this, he says. It is almost like he does not want us to think too much about them, like he does not want us to get stuck on any one of them but to be dazzled by the number and variety of the things the kingdom of heaven is like - like this and this and this.²

When catch our breath, we notice a common thread running through these parables - their essential hiddenness: the mustard seed hidden in the ground, the yeast hidden in the dough, the treasure hidden in the field, the pearl hidden among the other pearls, the net hidden in the depths of the sea. So, perhaps Jesus is trying to show us that the kingdom isn't readily apparent, but something below the surface, waiting to be discovered.³

If that's true, where do we start searching? Do we need to don our Indiana Jones' style hats, and break out a secret map? Because if the kingdom were hidden in this world, it would be hidden really well, right?

Or would it?

In her ponderings, Barbara Brown Taylor raises a stunning point:

[What if] God has resorted to the oldest trick in the book and hidden it in plain view. There is always that possibility, you know - that God decided to hide the kingdom of heaven not in any of the extraordinary places that treasure hunters would be sure to check - but in the last place that any of us would think to look, namely, in the ordinary circumstances of our everyday lives.⁴

Friends, doesn't that sound like something our God would do? Jesus has been trying to tell us this all along - that the kingdom of heaven is hidden in the ordinary, everyday-ness of our lives. Which why Jesus is talking about heaven in terms of farmers and fields, and women baking bread, and fishermen sorting fish, and merchants buying and selling things. If the kingdom of heaven has to do with these things - then the kingdom of heaven is to be found right here and now, in the ordinary people and places and activities of our lives.

It's just like our surprising, joyful, creative God to hide the kingdom of heaven in plain sight, right where we might stumble upon it in our day to day lives, and interactions with one another. The kingdom is found in these places, **this** is where we find the presence of God.

The kingdom of heaven is about being in relationship with God and one another, because that is where we find real treasure. Moments when we realize we're witnessing the kingdom in the midst of our day to day lives.

In our own time and place we can catch glimpses of the kingdom of God:

in the joy and chaos of the wedding reception for a Haitian couple, whose friends wanted to celebrate them, and chose our auditorium because it's a special place for these families who have been helped by Jewish Family Services and ESL classes in our building.

in the smile of the baby boy whose birthday was also part of that celebration.

in the stories shared from a hospital bed, with both laughter and tears.

in the playful exuberance of our poodle puppy, as he bounds across the too-long grass in the back yard.

in the grace and wisdom shared in our vestry retreat, and the fun of our "not-a-book-club" discussion about what we're reading.

in a clear dry day after the rain.

in the willingness of clergy friends to serve during my sabbatical.

in a homemade meal shared around a table with friends at Hotplate, complete with pot roast in the slow cooker.

in the brightly colored butterflies darting in and out of flower beds.

in the heartfelt exchange between those giving meals and those receiving them at the Allen Street doors on Thursday and Friday evenings.

in the tiny library project, the creation of care packages, and the intentional welcome extended to those visiting us, in the labyrinth and healing prayers, in the knitting of prayer shawls.

in this community as we worship and care for one another and the world.

The kingdom of heaven is like this and this and this...

Beloved Ones, as I get ready to go on sabbatical, I have a homework assignment for us. Jesus invites us to catch glimpses of grace, beauty, joy, delight, wisdom. To discover the treasures that truly matter - hiding in plain sight. In the weeks ahead, I invite us to pay attention to the parables around us. The kingdom of heaven is like this and this and this... I can't wait to share what we'll discover. Amen.

¹ Br. Jamie Nelson, SSJE, Brother Give us a Word, July 23, 2026.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Seeds of Heaven;" Sermon on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-49, as published in The Seeds of Heaven; Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew; Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, 41.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Seeds of Heaven;" Sermon on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-49, as published in The Seeds of Heaven; Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew; Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, 42.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Seeds of Heaven;" Sermon on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-49, as published in The Seeds of Heaven; Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew; Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, 44.